PATTERNS OF POWER · THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

The Neo-Assyrian Empire

The Complete Study · 911 — 745 — 609 BC

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

Held as tested, not revealed.

A case study in the Patterns of Power series.
Primary sources quoted exactly; modern scholarship paraphrased and credited.
Contested figures given as ranges. Nothing reconstructed from memory.

CONTENTS

PREFACE
Preface and Outline

LANDSCAPE
Torn from Assyria

MODULE 1
Mighty Bronze Pickaxes

MODULE 2
As Assyrians I Counted Them

MODULE 3
The Garment of a Sinner

MODULE 4
They Are to Have Wives

MODULE 5
Carry the Headpad and Mold Bricks

MODULE 6
A Price in Silver Like That in Copper

MODULE 7
In the Ears of the People That Are on the Wall

MODULE 8
The Bearded and the Eunuchs

MODULE 9
He Turned the Tablet Upside Down

MODULE 10
A Mound and a Ruin

MODULE 11
It Was Once Inhabited by the Medes

MODULE 12
Howbeit He Meaneth Not So

Preface and Outline

Front matter · how this study was made, the disciplines it holds itself to, and a map of its fourteen parts

The collaboration

This is a case study in the Patterns of Power series, applying the series' framework to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, from the accession of Adad-nirari II in 911 BC to the last Assyrian king's disappearance from the record at Harran in 609. The framework is a lens for reading how any order of power is founded, dressed and held: the floor of force beneath every order, the robe of doctrine laid over the floor to make the force cheap, the settlement that divides the spoils, the cost column in which each subject prices defection, the seam that manages the belief on which the whole depends, the default by which an elite coordinates without instruction, and — running through all of it — position logic, the proposition that rulers in like positions converge on like solutions because a position poses a problem with only a few good answers.

Assyria was chosen to test one proposition and one question. The proposition, banked in the series from an earlier case, was that a conqueror meeting an intact rival formation has four options and only four: destroy both the formation and the institution that carries it; replace both; leave both; or remove the institution and leave the formation. The question was whether Assyria — which moved something in the order of four million people across two and a half centuries and left, in the whole surviving documentary record, seventy-two identifiable individuals of Israelite or Judaean origin — had found a fifth. It had. Naming it correctly, and identifying its failure mode, is what this study is for.

A second proposition was put to the case in passing and came back stronger than expected: that a durable warrant must not be issuable by the wearer at will, and is always anchored in something the holder appears subject to rather than to control. Assyria restated its warrant at every accession for three hundred years, in a temple, in a city, before a priest who cried out that the king was not the king. Watching what happened to that warrant when the temple was destroyed turned out to be the study's closing finding.

The study was built the way the series is built, one module at a time. The author brought the framework, its spine, and the case, and held the collaboration to its

disciplines; Claude, Anthropic's model, did the research — verifying every load-bearing quotation, date and figure by web search against a source reproducing the primary text before any module was written — and produced the drafts, applying the framework module by module, each presented and confirmed before the next was begun. The framework's concepts are the series'; the Assyrian application, and the refinements it yielded, are the work of the collaboration.

The standing problem

Every study in this series has a source problem. This one has the deepest in the collection, and it governs everything.

For most of three centuries the only voice available is the conqueror's own, carved in stone, at royal expense, for an audience that included the gods. The annals never record a defeat. In three hundred years the king always wins, always by the favour of Ashur, and the only casualty figure the empire ever published was a liturgical formula of six men. That is not a gap in the archive; it is the archive's genre, as fixed a convention as the epic simile, and reading it as a defective chronicle rather than as a form of address is the easiest way to get this empire wrong in either direction — to believe the atrocities because they were written down, or to disbelieve the administration because it was written down by the same hand.

The study's method against this was to spend heavily wherever a second voice exists, and to say so plainly wherever one does not. The second voices are the Babylonian chronicles, written by the losing side of Assyria's oldest quarrel; the Hebrew historians and prophets, positioned and hostile and valuable for exactly that reason; the royal correspondence, in which governors and scholars told the king things no monument would carry; and, at the very end, the report of a Greek soldier who marched past the ruins two centuries later and was told they had belonged to somebody else.

One methodological finding came out of the problem itself and is used throughout: **the annals do record defeat, as a change of verb.** When an Assyrian king takes a city he *stormed, captured, destroyed, devastated, burned it with fire*. When he does not, he *shut the enemy up in his city, slew many before the gates, set up my royal image, received tribute*, and marched away. The two clusters are completely regular across three centuries. A monopolised record is not opaque; it is constrained, and the constraint leaves a shape.

The disciplines

Five rules govern every module.

Quotation. Public-domain primary sources are quoted exactly, at the length the argument needs, because in an order held together by legal fictions the precise wording is the evidence and not its decoration. The corpus this study quotes from is D. D. Luckenbill's *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago, 1926–27), which carries the royal inscriptions; C. J. Gadd's *The Fall of Nineveh* (London, 1923), which carries the Babylonian chronicle of the collapse; the Authorised Version, which carries the account of the party that lost; and Xenophon's *Anabasis*. Modern copyrighted scholarship — the State Archives of Assyria volumes, the Royal Inscriptions series, and the work of Radner, Oded, Postgate, Dezső, Mattila, Parpola, Frahm and others — is paraphrased, briefly, and credited. Where Luckenbill's century-old reading is now known to be dated or wrong, the study says so on the face of the module rather than in a footnote.

No fabrication. No quotation, date, attribution or figure is ever invented or reconstructed from memory. What cannot be verified against a source reproducing the primary text is dropped or flagged, never guessed. Contested figures are given as ranges. And because every casualty and deportation number in this subject was carved by the men who did the killing, in a genre built to exaggerate, all of them are treated as claims and labelled as such.

Gravity without partisanship. Suffering is held with gravity, and the study refuses both flattery and demonisation. It writes from the top of the order, where the men who ran it actually stood. It declines to let the atrocity do the work: the flaying and the impalement are genuinely there and are recorded with gravity, but an atrocity is not an explanation, and the questions asked of it are always what the terror was for, what it cost, and whether it worked. Legibility is not pardon: to explain an order's logic, even to credit its competence, is never to excuse it.

Contribution. Every module returns a refinement to the framework, stated plainly in its closing section, rather than merely applying the framework to the case. The discipline is one spine and its confirmations, not a manufactured new law each chapter, and the findings are allowed to compound across the modules rather than being announced fresh each time.

Weakest evidence on the face of the module. Each part closes with a note separating exact primary quotation from paraphrased scholarship and naming its own weak links, including where they would embarrass the argument.

Four particular cautions were held throughout. The atrocity is not allowed to substitute for analysis. The Bible is not allowed to drive the periodisation — Israel and Judah were a minor province, over-represented in the modern study of this empire by an enormous factor because their record survived. The Samaritan origin question is live

religious and ethnic ground, and the study names whose account is whose and declines to adjudicate. And the Assyrian name is claimed today by a living people with real stakes; the study notes that the question exists and goes no further.

What the Neo-Assyrian Empire added to the framework

The case confirmed a great deal the framework had banked, and added several findings of its own. Chief among them:

That **the recursion runs under the conqueror as surely as under the conquered** — that Assyria in 911 stood on a completed Middle Assyrian build absorbed in childhood as the shape of the world, so that the empire opens not as a founding but as an irredentist claim worked through a map of losses.

That a distinct type of floor exists which the collection had not named: **the floor of reach**, where the monopoly is not on the instrument of violence but on the ability to deliver it at distance — and that such a floor has a boundary which is a radius rather than a line, must be re-demonstrated every season to price anything at all, and grows by consuming the floors it defeats.

That **the same externality which makes a warrant durable is what makes it expensive**, since visible subjection means an enforceable claim; and that the anchor's holders can and do declare the king the violator, which is what a usurper's charge sheet is for.

That **a robe cut for the funders does not work by making the ruled compliant but by making the rulers unable to stop**, so that a construction of this kind does not stabilise an order but locks the throttle open.

That **formation is not transmitted by teaching but by a community that shares it** — the fifth option, and the study's central finding: a conqueror who removes the community never has to touch the formation, because there is no unformed person and the next generation will simply be formed by the surroundings the state has arranged. And that this option fails differently from the other four: not by producing a rival but by producing something the conqueror did not specify.

That **revolt tracks exit rather than grievance**, so that the map of chronic rebellion and the map of the floor's failures are one list and not two.

That extraction must be sorted into **what is drawn from a flow the extracted reproduce annually and what is drawn from a stock it took centuries to accumulate**, because the two look identical in the year they are collected and behave completely differently over a generation — and an order that has confused them is insolvent in a way its own accounts cannot show it.

That an order can run **two information systems under opposite rules at once**, because upward-facing information is disciplined by consequences and outward-facing information is disciplined only by genre; and that **plurality of interpreters is an instrument before it is a liberty**, since Assyria built the crowded seam deliberately and made it available to one man.

That **the tighter a default binds between successions, the more violent the succession must be**, because non-convertible elite capital makes a change at the top a total revaluation of everything a magnate owns.

That a liberty with no enforcement mechanism may nonetheless be a **stored justification** waiting for a faction that needs one; and that **the unit a liberty attaches to names the constituency that bought it.**

That when an order falls, the four cracks need not be four alternatives: here they ran in **sequence**, beginning at the one point the arrangement had left unpriced.

And, largest of all, that **every subsystem which made expansion compulsory also made contraction impossible** — so that the Assyrian collapse is best read not as a failure to adapt but as the absence of any mechanism by which adaptation could have been proposed.

The arc

A landscape opening and twelve modules, each with a framework function and its own title.

Landscape — the ground, the god, and the orders already standing. *Torn from Assyria.* A heartland growing grain on rainfall in the belt the specialists call the zone of uncertainty, with no defensible line on any side; a god who was a deified city and a king who was his vice-regent; and an empire that opens by reciting the towns that had been taken from it.

1 — The Floor of Force. *Mighty Bronze Pickaxes.* Not iron, which everyone had, but arrival: an army that cut road through country that had none, crossed unbridged rivers in flood, and built fifteen thousand tonnes of assault ramp under archery — and failed precisely where a ramp could not be built.

2 — The Settlement. *As Assyrians I Counted Them.* Two legal statuses and what each owed; the fiction that incorporation and liability are one act; officers who could found no line; and the exemption of the god's city, which a king could not breach and keep his throne.

3 — The Robe. *The Garment of a Sinner.* A king writing to his god in the salutation form of a governor's despatch; the conversion of every enemy into an oath-

breaker; a justification buried in foundations and carved in a script the viewers could not read; and a creation epic edited four years after its city was destroyed.

4 — Formation. *They Are to Have Wives.* The study's main event: a royal order that deportees be married, an official asking the crown to pay the bride price, and the discovery that a formation can be ended without anybody teaching anybody anything.

5 — The Cost Column. *Carry the Headpad and Mold Bricks.* Six ledgers run separately; a benefit column funded from somebody else's cost column; and the finding that the people with the most to resent were the quietest, while the empire's peace was broken by people who had somewhere else to go.

6 — Extraction. *A Price in Silver Like That in Copper.* An itemised sack down to the gold peg in the temple door; a king boasting that his plunder had devalued plunder; and a state meeting recurring commitments out of non-recurring receipts.

7 — Information and Suppression. *In the Ears of the People That Are on the Wall.* An officer shouting over a government's head at its people; a scholarly network structured so the king would receive contradictory reports; and an apparatus that manufactured not only knowledge but duties, one of them lethal.

8 — Elite Coordination and the Default. *The Bearded and the Eunuchs.* A dowager queen binding an empire; a commander-in-chief who used the king's own warrant without naming a king; and six crises in three centuries, every one of them at a transfer of the crown.

9 — Plurality or Foreclosure. *He Turned the Tablet Upside Down.* A bill of rights written as an omen series and kept in the king's own library; liberties bought from cities to buy cities; and a residue that survived the physical destruction of what it protected.

10 — Change and Collapse. *A Mound and a Ruin.* Four million moved people and not one rising; a man who destroyed the empire from an office the empire had given him; the drought that re-priced Assyria against Babylon; and the former victims who fought to save it.

11 — The Grim Accounting. *It Was Once Inhabited by the Medes.* The sword counted on the killers' own claims, with no entry for their own dead; the metabolic note called on a heartland lifted above its carrying capacity by an anomaly nobody could recognise; and the forgetting, dated.

12 — Convergence and Divergence. *Howbeit He Meaneth Not So.* The controlled comparison at full evidence, the fifth option named and its failure mode identified, the third solution to the anchor's dilemma and its cost, and the strongest case for Assyria stated at full strength and answered without flinching.

A note on sources. This front matter is descriptive and makes no primary-source claims of its own; every factual assertion about the case is established, with its sources

and its flags, in the module it summarises. The framework it describes is the series'; the disciplines it lists are the ones the modules hold themselves to and document in their own closing notes. The reader who wishes to test this study should begin with those notes, which are written to make that testing possible — including where it would embarrass the argument. Two modules rest more heavily on inference than the rest and say so: Module 4, whose reading of the marriage letters as an instrument of formation is this study's own, and Module 5, whose claim that revolt tracked exit rather than grievance cannot be separated from the alternative that tribal organisation rather than terrain made those populations capable of resistance.

LANDSCAPE

Torn from Assyria

Landscape · the ground, the god, and the orders already standing — what a king inherited in 911 BC, and why almost nothing about the empire he is credited with beginning was new

A country with no edge

Begin with the ground, because the ground poses a problem that will not go away and that every man who ever held this throne had to answer in some fashion. The Assyrian heartland is a triangle of country on the upper Tigris: the city of Assur at the southern point, on a limestone spur on the west bank some hundred kilometres downstream of the mound that would be Nineveh; Nineveh itself at the northern point, across the river from what is now Mosul; and Arbela, modern Erbil, out to the east on the plain between the Zabs. Inside that triangle grain grows on rainfall. That single fact separates Assyria from Babylonia as completely as language or law does, because southern Mesopotamia grows nothing at all without irrigation, and irrigation means canals, and canals mean a permanent coordinating authority with a claim on every household's labour written into the landscape itself. Assyria needed no such thing. Its farmers ploughed and waited for the sky.

The trouble is the sky. The heartland sits in the belt bounded by the two-hundred- and three-hundred-millimetre isohyets — the lines marking where two hundred and three hundred millimetres of rain fall in an average year — and the specialist literature on Mesopotamian dry farming has a name for that belt which is worth quoting because it is unimprovable: the zone of uncertainty. It is the margin at which cereal cultivation is possible but not reliable, and the reason is not the average but the variance. Year-to-year variability in that region runs somewhere between forty and sixty per cent, so that "an average year" is a statistical artefact and not an experience anybody has. A run of good years fills the granaries and grows the population; a run of bad ones does not reduce the harvest, it removes it. Grain yields in northern Iraq are acutely sensitive to rainfall precisely across the two hundred to four hundred millimetre band and comparatively insensitive above it, which means the Assyrian core sat exactly on the part of the curve where a modest shift in the weather is the difference between surplus and nothing.

And the triangle has no wall around it. There is no mountain range on its western side, no desert wide enough to be a moat, no sea anywhere. North of it the land rises

toward the Armenian highlands and the country the Assyrians called Nairi; east of it the Zagros begins, and behind the Zagros are peoples with horses; west of it the steppe runs unbroken to the Euphrates and beyond, and it is open steppe, the kind that carries pastoralists and their flocks in a wet decade and drives them onto somebody else's fields in a dry one; south of it the Tigris runs down into Babylonia, and Babylonia has been a state since before Assur had a temple. A ruler sitting at Assur could be raided from four directions and had a natural line of defence against none of them.

Set those two facts side by side and the arithmetic is stark. A polity on that ground cannot store its way out of a bad year from its own land, because its own land is what failed; and it cannot hold a frontier, because it has no frontier to hold. Both problems have the same answer, and it is not a mysterious one: take other people's grain, and put your defensive line on other people's ground. That is not psychology and it is not a national character. It is what the position offers.

But the position is a permission and not a cause, and the discipline of this study requires saying so at the outset rather than at the end. Other polities sat on that same ground and did not become empires. Guzana, at the mound now called Tell Halaf on the Khabur, sat in country with better and more dependable rainfall than Assur's, was ruled in this period by an Aramean dynasty that built a palace with carved orthostats and monumental statuary, and remained a small kingdom until Assyria swallowed it. Bit-Zamani up at Amedu, Bit-Halupe down at the Khabur mouth, Laqe along the middle Euphrates — all of them faced a version of the same problem and none of them answered it the way Assyria did. The geography sets the question. It does not write the answer, and what Assyria had that Guzana did not is most of what the following twelve chapters are about.

The god who was a city

What Assyria had, to begin with, was a god who was a place.

Ashur was not a national deity in the way Marduk was Babylon's or Chemosh was Moab's — a divine person with a domain, honoured in a city. Ashur *was* the city. The name is the same word for the god, the town on the limestone spur, and eventually the whole country, which the Assyrians called *māt Aššur*, the land of the god Ashur. There is no surviving myth of Ashur's birth, no consort in the earliest layers, no theogony in which he takes his place; the theology is later grafting, and much of what was eventually said about him was borrowed from Babylonian material about Enlil and Marduk. Underneath the grafts is the deified place itself.

That place is very old. The earliest occupation archaeologists can reach at Assur lies beneath the Ishtar temple, whose first phase was raised on a deliberately imported and

prepared layer of sand laid over virgin soil. Radiocarbon on charcoal from a floor immediately above the sand has recently been published as falling somewhere between about 2896 and 2702 BC, which would push the site's foundation earlier than the ED III date of roughly 2600 to 2340 BC that most of the twentieth-century scholarship had settled on and back toward the very early third-millennium date the site's original excavator proposed. That is a live and freshly revised question and it should be given as a range rather than a figure. What is not in doubt is that when a king in 911 BC walked into the Ashur temple, he walked into a sanctuary on a site that had been sacred for something on the order of two thousand years — longer before him than he is before us.

The Assyrians knew it, and curated it. The Middle Assyrian inventory of the Ishtar temple included votive plaques of Ititi and of Zarriqum which were already antiquities when they were catalogued; Zarriqum had governed Assur for the kings of Ur around 2045 BC, in an era when the city was a peripheral province of a southern empire. Tukulti-Ninurta I recovered stone building-tablets of his great-grandfather Adad-nirari I and sealed them into a capsule in the wall behind the podium. Ashur's own temple, Ehursagkurkurra — the House of the Mountain of the Lands, in Luckenbill's older transliteration Eharsagkurkurra — was rebuilt by king after king, each recording that he had cleared away his predecessor's ruin, gone down to the foundation, and made it more splendid than it had been before, and each closing with an instruction to whoever should find the building fallen in centuries to come. Ashur-dan II, three generations before this study opens, restored the Metal-Workers' Gate and wrote that it had been built by Tiglath-pileser, *"who lived before my (time),"* and that when it should fall to ruin again, *"may (some) future prince restore its ruins, may he return my inscribed name to its place."* The Assyrian relation to Assyrian antiquity was not nostalgia. It was maintenance.

And out of the deified city came the shape of the warrant, which is the single most important thing on this landscape.

From the early second millennium, the men who ruled Assur styled themselves *iššiak Aššur* — vice-regent, or steward, or governor, of the god Ashur — and that title stayed in continuous use, without interruption, until the state ceased to exist in 609 BC. It is a modest formula and it means what it says: the god is the ruler of the land, and the man on the throne administers it on his behalf. Luckenbill, translating a century ago, renders the standard Assyrian titulary as *"prefect of Enlil (Bel), priest of Assur"* and elsewhere as "viceroy," and readers should know that his rendering is dated; the modern reading of the same formula is closer to "appointee of the god Enlil, vice-regent of the god Ashur," and the difference matters, because "priest" suggests a cultic

office and "vice-regent" states a constitutional one. From the fourteenth century the kings added grander things on top — *šarru*, king; king of the universe; king of the four regions of the world — but they never dropped the vice-regency. Adad-nirari II, opening his own annals with as loud a self-assertion as survives from the ancient world, still identifies himself in the next breath as *"Son of Assur-dan, prefect of Enlil (Bel), priest of Assur."*

The ritual made the point unmistakable. When an Assyrian king was invested in the temple at Assur — a ceremony attested from the Middle Assyrian period, on tablets from the generation after Tukulti-Ninurta I — the priest of Ashur went before him and cried out *"Ashur is king! Ashur is king!"* The accession opens by denying that the man acceding is king. Six hundred years later the same exclamation was still being made, in the coronation hymn composed for Ashurbanipal, and it is from that liturgy that the king's obligation is stated in its plainest form: he is to extend the god's land with his just sceptre. Expansion was not an appetite the theology accommodated. It was a duty the theology imposed, on a servant who held office at the pleasure of an owner he could not appoint, retire, or become.

It is worth pausing on how unusual that is, because the corpus has met a great many warrants and most of them are softer. A warrant grounded in descent — the Solomonic claim, the Genghisid line — is a fact about ancestors, which is a real constraint but a constraint the holder satisfies simply by existing. A mandate that can be withdrawn from heaven is genuinely external but has no address. Assyria's warrant had an address: a building, on a ridge, above a river, containing a god who was the building. The king could and did move his residence — to Kalhu, to a city built from nothing at Dur-Sharrukin, to Nineveh — but he could not move Ashur, and he was buried at Assur wherever he had lived. That is about as far as a warrant can get from *I am the strongest, therefore I rule*. What such a warrant costs, whether three centuries of annual restatement wore it into a formula, and what happens to an office when the building housing its warrant is destroyed, are questions this study will have to answer rather than assume.

The city before the empire

The order that produced all this was not, at the start, an empire or anything like one, and the second thing to hold about this landscape is that the Assyrian state which the ninth-century kings inherited was itself a naturalised former conquest — twice over.

In the early second millennium Assur was a merchant city. Its people ran a long-distance trade that carried Mesopotamian textiles and tin north-west into Anatolia and brought silver and gold back, operating out of resident commercial quarters attached

to but physically separate from the Anatolian towns; the largest and best documented sat outside Kanesh, modern Kültepe, and has yielded tens of thousands of tablets of contracts, partnership agreements, letters and lawsuits. The polity that ran it was not a monarchy in the ordinary sense. Authority lay with "the City" — *ālum*, Assur itself as a corporate body — exercised through an assembly, an annually appointed eponym whose name dated the year, and a hereditary *iššiakkum* who was one power centre among three rather than the state in person. Ilu-shuma, one of these early rulers, left an inscription on a stone object now in the British Museum that reads in full: *"Ilu-shuma, viceroy of Assyria, beloved of Assur and Ishtar, son of Shalim-ahum, viceroy of Assyria, for Ishtar, his lady, for his life, has built (this) temple."* That is the whole of it. There are no conquests in it because there were none.

Then, early in the eighteenth century, an Amorite warlord named Shamshi-Adad took Assur and made it a religious capital within a kingdom of upper Mesopotamia that he had assembled himself. The line did not last, and it was resented; an otherwise unattested ruler named Puzur-Sin left an alabaster inscription denouncing the foreign house and recording that he had thrown out its descendant. That inscription is a single text and its dating is uncertain, and it should be leaned on lightly, but what it attests is not in doubt: the Assyrians remembered a period of foreign rule and remembered it as an intrusion.

After that the city passed for a century or more under the domination of Mitanni, the Hurrian power that held the Khabur and the north Syrian plain, and at some point in the fifteenth century the Mitannian king Shaushtatar sacked Assur itself. The rulers of that period took modest titles, built city walls, restored temples, and did not campaign. When the Assyrian king lists were compiled and recompiled later, and when a Neo-Assyrian scribe copied out the "seventeen kings who lived in tents" at the head of the sequence, the effect was to iron all of this into one continuous line running from an origin in the deep past to the throne of the day. That was the point of the lists. They existed to make dynastic continuity out of a history that had contained a foreign dynasty, a period of vassalage to a Hurrian empire, at least one king who reigned a single month before his uncle deposed him, and a stretch in the eighteenth century which the list itself describes as an era of sons of nobodies.

So the Assyria of 911 BC stood on ground that had already been conquered, subordinated, and repossessed several times, and its own founding text was a curated artefact. None of that made the order fake. It made it old, and an old order is a real one: by the tenth century no Assyrian needed to be persuaded that Ashur was the god of the land, any more than he needed to be persuaded that barley grew in the spring. What had been built had become the furniture of the world. But it had been built, and the

seams are visible in the sources if one is willing to look at them, and a study that treats the Assyrian order as a given rather than as a product will misread everything that follows.

The first empire, and the instruments it left lying about

There had already been an Assyrian empire, and this is the fact that most needs stating before anything else, because it disciplines every claim about what the Neo-Assyrian kings invented.

In the middle of the fourteenth century Ashur-uballit I threw off Mitannian overlordship, began styling himself king, and wrote to the pharaoh in Egypt as an equal — sending a chariot, two horses and a date-shaped piece of lapis lazuli as a greeting-gift, and asking that his messenger be permitted to see the country and report back. The Babylonian king's reaction survives in the same Amarna archive and is a small masterpiece of wounded precedence: he wrote to Egypt to complain that these were *"my Assyrian vassals,"* that he had not sent them, that they had come on their own authority, and that if the pharaoh valued Babylonian friendship he would let them conclude no business and send them home empty-handed. The letter fixes, in one paragraph, a relation that will run through the whole of this study: Babylon, older and grander, regarding Assyria as an upstart; Assyria, indifferent to the objection, dealing directly with whoever mattered.

What followed was two centuries of expansion. Adad-nirari I broke Mitanni's successor state in the Khabur; Shalmaneser I finished it. Shalmaneser's account of the Hanigalbat campaign, in Luckenbill's translation, has him surrounded and cut off from water, forcing the battle out of thirst and exhaustion: *"I cut down their hordes, 14,400 of them I overthrew and took as living captives. Nine of his strongholds, his capital city, I captured. One hundred and eighty of his cities I overturned to tells and ruins."* Two warnings attach to that sentence and both belong on the page rather than in a footnote. The first is that the figure is the perpetrator's own and is a claim, not a count. The second is that Luckenbill's reading of the crucial verb is now generally rejected: the modern editions render the same passage as a claim to have *blinded* the fourteen thousand four hundred, in one eye, rather than merely to have taken them alive. A great deal turns on which is right, and the honest position is that a century-old translation says one thing, current scholarship says another, and this study will quote the former while telling the reader that the latter is probably correct.

Then Tukulti-Ninurta I, in the thirteenth century, did the thing that had never been done. He defeated the Kassite king of Babylon and brought him north as a trophy: *"In the midst of that battle my own hand captured Kashtilash, the Kassite king.*

His royal neck I trod on with my feet, like a galtappi. Stripped and bound, before Assur my lord, I brought him." And in the same corpus, recorded in the ordinary way among his building works and his hunting, is a line that ought to arrest anyone who believes mass deportation was an invention of the eighth century: *"On my accession to the royal throne, 28,800 Hittite warriors from the other side of the Euphrates, I carried off."*

What happened to Tukulti-Ninurta afterwards is the most instructive passage on this entire landscape, and it survives because Luckenbill printed the Babylonian version beside the Assyrian one. The Babylonian chronicle records that the Assyrian king pulled down the wall of Babylon, put the Babylonians to the sword, profanely removed the treasure of Esagila, and carried the god Marduk himself away to Assyria. Then it records what came of it: *"As for Tukulti-Urta, who had brought evil upon Babylon, Assur-nasir-pal, his son, and the nobles of Assyria, revolted and they cast him from his throne; in Kar-Tukulti-Urta they besieged him in his palace and slew him with the sword."*

An Assyrian king was deposed and killed by his own son and his own magnates, and the reason given by the chronicle is what he had done to Babylon. Whether that is the whole reason or a Babylonian gloss on a factional murder cannot be recovered. But the fact that this was a sayable reason — that a scribe could write it down and expect it to be understood — is evidence of something about the Assyrian coordinating class that will matter enormously five hundred years later, when the same question of what to do about Babylon splits the empire in civil war.

The last of the great Middle Assyrian kings, Tiglath-pileser I, campaigned from the Mediterranean to Babylon and left a line that measures both his reach and his failure: *"For the twenty-eighth time I crossed the Euphrates, in pursuit of (lit., back of) the Ahlame Arameans, — the second time in one year."* Twenty-eight crossings. A man does not cross the same river twenty-eight times after the same enemy because he keeps winning.

So the inventory of what the Middle Assyrian empire had already established, and left standing when it died, is this: the god and his mandate to expand; the vice-regency; a provincial administration with governors and a documentary practice sophisticated enough to leave archives; the annals as a genre in which the king never loses; the deportation of populations as a usable instrument; and a remembered map of Assyrian possession running west to the Euphrates and beyond. Every one of those things was lying on the ground in 911, and every one of them had been made by someone else.

A hundred and twenty years of almost nothing

Then it came apart, and the record goes quiet in a way that is itself a finding.

A chronicle fragment from Assur covering the last years of Tiglath-pileser I reports — in the standard modern edition, which is paraphrased here rather than quoted — that in a certain eponym year people ate one another to stay alive; that the Aramean houses swelled like a flood's ravaging water, plundered the crops of Assyria, and captured many of its fortified cities; that the population fled toward the mountains of Habruri, and that the Arameans took their gold, their silver and their goods. Another entry records that the whole harvest of Assyria was ruined, that the Aramean tribes seized the bank of the Tigris, and that they plundered the districts of Nineveh and Kilizi — which is to say, the heartland itself, within sight of the capital cities.

That is the zone of uncertainty presenting its bill. A drying, cooling climatic shift across the wider region between roughly 1250 and 900 BC is well attested in the palaeoclimate record and is the background to the whole Late Bronze Age unravelling; against it, pastoral populations on the steppe moved toward water and cultivation, the Assyrian harvest failed, and a state whose only defensive asset was its army lost the ability to feed the army. Ashur-bel-kala died around 1053 and after him the record becomes very thin indeed for something like a hundred and twenty years — a handful of stele inscriptions, brick stamps, and names in a king list. Assyria shrank back into its triangle.

It did not, however, cease. The eponym office kept naming years. The temples kept being repaired. The lists kept being copied. When Ashur-dan II came to the throne in 934 he began putting the pieces back, and his annals — recovered too late for Luckenbill and quoted here only in paraphrase from the modern edition — describe bringing home the exhausted people of Assyria who had abandoned their cities and gone up into other lands in the face of hunger, settling them in proper houses, building palaces in the districts, hitching up ploughs, and piling up more grain than any king before him. Every clause of that is a restoration. Nothing in it is new.

What Adad-nirari II said he was doing

His son took the throne in 911 BC, and because a continuous list of eponym officials survives from that year forward, modern scholarship generally starts the Neo-Assyrian Empire there. It should be said plainly that this is an artefact of the archive rather than a fact about the world: the field begins where the dating begins. A respectable minority starts the period in 934 with Ashur-dan II instead, and the deportation policy that would define the empire has been traced by at least one major authority from that reign rather than from 911. The date is a convenience. It is a good convenience and this study will use it, but a reader should know what it is.

Adad-nirari II's annals were recovered by the German excavator at Assur, attached as a long preface to a short text about rebuilding a temple, and they open with one of the most extraordinary bursts of self-assertion in the corpus. The great gods, he says, created him; they changed the state of his members and brought his body to perfection; they put a sceptre in his hand called Ruler of Peoples. And then: *"I am royal, I am lordly, I am mighty, I am honored, I am exalted, I am glorified, I am powerful, I am all powerful, I am brilliant, I am lion-brave, I am manly, I am supreme, I am noble."* And: *"Like fire I burn, like the storm I cast down."*

That is the voice the Assyrian annals will keep for three hundred years. But read past the noise to the verbs describing what he actually did, and they are not the verbs of conquest. They are the verbs of repossession. *"The cities of Arinu, Turhu, Zaduri, the confederacy(?) of Shupre, were torn from Assyria."* Torn from — the passive of a theft, an accounting of what had been lost. *"Arrapha, Lubda, strongholds of Karduniash, I restored to the territory of Assyria."* Restored to. And of a ruined town on the northern road: *"The old city of Apku, which the kings who went before me had built, had fallen to decay and was turned to a mound of ruins. That city I rebuilt. From its foundation to its top I repaired and finished it."*

This is not a founding. It is a man with a map of losses, working through it. He fought four campaigns into Hanigalbat, over the same ground his ancestors had held, and at Gidara he noted that the Arameans had held the town by force ever since the days of Tiglath-pileser, son of Ashur-resh-ishi — naming, as the measure of the offence, a king two centuries dead. The empire that would end up ruling from the Nile to the Zagros opens with an irredentist claim.

The orders already standing

And what did that map of losses have on it, in the year the recovery began?

South of him, Babylonia. It was in poor condition — the Kassite dynasty had fallen to Elam in the twelfth century, Aramean and Chaldean tribal groups were pressing into the countryside and would within a generation be organised into the "houses" of Bit-Dakkuri, Bit-Amukani and Bit-Yakin, and the king in Babylon controlled the old cities more than the land between them. Adad-nirari fought two campaigns down the Diyala and the middle Euphrates, took Hit and Zanqu, and pushed the border south. And then, according to the Assyrian text that records the whole affair, the two courts exchanged daughters in marriage and fixed a boundary between them. Both things: the campaign and the marriage, the annexation and the entente, within one reign. That is not inconsistency. It is the beginning of a three-century inability to decide what Babylon was, which arose because Babylon was two things at once — a weak neighbour

that could be beaten, and the older and more prestigious civilisation whose language the Assyrians wrote, whose literature their scribes copied, whose gods they honoured, and whose script they used to record their own boasts about defeating it.

West of him, across the Khabur and toward the Euphrates, the country was full of small Aramean kingdoms named for their founders in the fashion those peoples used — Bit-Zamani around Amedu in the Tur Abdin, Bit-Bahiani at Guzana on the Khabur, Bit-Halupe at the Khabur's confluence with the Euphrates, Laqe along the middle river, Bit-Adini with its centre at Til Barsip. Beyond them, in the bend of the Euphrates and up into the Taurus, lay the states modern scholarship calls Neo-Hittite or Luwian-Aramean: Carchemish, Milid, Kummuh, Gurgum, Sam'al, Pattin, and further west Hamath and eventually Damascus. Every one of these was itself a naturalised former conquest. The Neo-Hittite dynasts wrote in Luwian hieroglyphs and styled themselves the heirs of a Hittite empire that had been dead for two centuries, ruling populations that were increasingly Aramaic-speaking; the Aramean houses ruled mounds that had been continuously occupied for three or four thousand years, and Kapara's palace at Guzana was decorated with a sculptural programme mixing Mesopotamian, Hittite and Hurrian motifs, which is what a successful synthesis of several prior conquests looks like when it has become simply the local style.

North of him, the Nairi lands — a term the Assyrians had been using for centuries to mean the mountain country toward Lake Van without ever meaning a single polity by it. Adad-nirari's own titulary mentions a land of Uruatri, a name Shalmaneser I had used six hundred years earlier; whether that is the Urartu which appears as an organised and dangerous kingdom in the ninth century is disputed and should not be assumed. The unified Urartian state, with a king named Arame, its capitals at Sugunia and then Arzashkun, and finally the fortress at Tushpa on Lake Van, becomes visible in Assyrian sources only from around 858, half a century after this study opens. In 911 the north was a problem, not yet a rival.

East, in the Zagros, lay Zamua, Gilzanu, the Mannean country and a scatter of small horse-breeding polities. The Medes are not in the record at all yet; they first appear in Assyrian texts in the ninth century. The people who would burn Nineveh were, in 911, not worth an Assyrian scribe's attention.

Further away, in the Levant, Damascus and Hamath and the Phoenician trading cities of the coast; and inland, among many small kingdoms of comparable size, the two successor states of a united Israelite monarchy which had divided some twenty years earlier. It is worth saying now, once, and then not saying again: Israel and Judah were minor provincial matters from an Assyrian point of view, and they are over-represented in the modern study of this empire by an enormous factor, for the excellent reason that

their record survived and mattered profoundly to later readers while the records of Bit-Adini and Zamua did not. They will be used here where they supply what almost nothing else supplies — an account of Assyrian conduct written by people Assyria did things to. They will not be allowed to organise the empire around themselves.

And beyond all of it, Egypt: fractured, ruled from the Delta by a dynasty of Libyan descent, with the priesthood of Amun holding Thebes, capable of the occasional campaign into Palestine but not of projecting power into Syria. There was, in 911 BC, no other great power in the world Assyria could see.

The archive, and the shape of its silence

One last feature of the landscape, and it is a feature of the sources rather than of the country, but it governs everything that can be said.

From Adad-nirari II onward, the Assyrians dated their years by an annually appointed official, the *limmu* or eponym, and lists of these officials survive continuously from 911 down into the reign of Ashurbanipal. That gives this period an absolute chronology of a precision unmatched anywhere in the ancient world before the Greeks, because one of the entries fixes the whole sequence to the calendar. The eponym year of Bur-Sagale of Guzana carries a note recording a *"revolt in the city of Ashur"* and, in the month Simanu, an eclipse of the sun — the verb used is *akallu*, the sun "bent" or "obscured." Astronomical calculation puts that eclipse on 15 June 763 BC, and every date in this study hangs from it. There is some argument about whether the eclipse was total or partial as seen from Nineveh itself, and about whether the entry belongs to Ashur-dan III's ninth, tenth or eleventh year, but the anchor holds.

Against that precision stands the deepest source problem in this collection. For most of the three centuries ahead, the only voice available is the conqueror's own, carved in stone at royal expense, for an audience that included the gods and posterity — and in the whole surviving corpus of Assyrian royal inscription, the king never loses. Not once. Campaigns end in victory or are not recorded; enemies flee, submit, or are slaughtered like sheep; the favour of Ashur is never withheld. That is not a gap in the archive. It is the archive's genre, as fixed a literary convention as the epic simile, and reading it as a defective chronicle rather than as a form of address is the single easiest way to get this empire wrong in either direction — to believe the atrocities because they are written down, or to disbelieve the administration because it is written down by the same hand.

Which means that everything in this study will turn on the places where a second voice exists: the Babylonian chronicles, written by the losing side of the empire's oldest quarrel; the Hebrew historians, positioned and hostile and priceless for exactly that

reason; the letters of the royal correspondence, in which governors and scholars tell the king things no annal would carry; the omen reports, in which the empire's own experts sometimes had to deliver bad news; and, at the very end, the report of a Greek soldier marching past the ruins. Where two voices survive for one event, this study will spend heavily. Where only one survives, it will say so.

Reading the landscape against the framework

The standing discipline of this collection is that a conqueror never meets an aboriginal baseline — that whatever order he finds in the people he conquers is itself an earlier conquest, naturalised across enough generations that the conquered experience it not as a settlement imposed on their ancestors but as the plain shape of the world. That holds fully here. Every polity on Assyria's map was a former conquest that had taken: Babylon a Semitic overlay on Sumer administered for four centuries by a Kassite dynasty from the mountains, the Neo-Hittite states the residue of an empire destroyed in the Bronze Age collapse, the Aramean houses new dynasties on mounds four millennia old, and the Assyrian relation to all of them the relation of one naturalised build to another.

What this case adds is the mirror image, and it is the contribution the Landscape makes to the framework. **The recursion runs under the conqueror as surely as it runs under the conquered.** A conqueror does not stand on bedrock either. What Adad-nirari II found when he looked at his own state was not raw material and not a set of options; it was a completed and naturalised build, made by men five hundred years dead, which he had absorbed in childhood as the way the world is. The god's ownership of the land was not a policy he adopted. The obligation to extend the god's territory was not a strategy he selected. The vice-regency, the provincial governorate, the annals as a form, the moving of populations as a thing one does with a defeated enemy — all of it was there before he was, installed in him by the same formation that installed it in his magnates and his scribes. He did not choose those instruments over alternatives. In the ordinary case, the alternatives were not in view.

That has an immediate and practical consequence for how this study must be read, and it is a warning against the shape the argument would otherwise want to take. The empire's great administrative transformation is conventionally dated to 745 BC and credited to one man. The evidence for that dating is real and will be examined. But the test cannot be whether Tiglath-pileser III did these things — he certainly did some of them — but whether he *originated* them or *systematised* something the previous build had already contained, since we now know that the previous build contained provinces, contained deportation on a five-figure scale, and contained the ideology that made both

obligatory. An apparent invention must be checked against the inheritance before it is credited to the man who is remembered for it. History rhymes because positions recur; but it also rhymes because the men in those positions are reaching, without noticing that they are reaching, for tools their great-grandfathers left on the bench.

The second thing this landscape offers, and it is offered as a proposition to be tested rather than a finding, concerns where a warrant is anchored. This collection has held that a legitimating claim is always borrowed from a currency the audience already honours, never minted. Assyria suggests a sharper condition underneath that one: that a durable warrant must be anchored in something the holder appears subject to rather than something he can issue. No order in this corpus has founded a lasting claim on *I am the strongest, therefore I rule and I say who owns what*, because such a claim is the holder's own say-so restated, and a say-so cannot underwrite itself. Assyria's answer to that problem is the most physical in the collection. The warrant is not a bloodline, not a mandate, not a covenant, but a building on a limestone ridge above the Tigris containing a god who is the building, before whose priest the king is annually reminded that he is not the king. A man can lie about his ancestors. He cannot move a temple.

Whether that made the claim stronger or more brittle is precisely what the next twelve chapters have to determine, and the case for brittleness is not small: a warrant with a physical address is a warrant with a single point of failure. It is worth recording here, without arguing it yet, that in 614 BC the Medes and Babylonians took the city of Assur and destroyed the temple of the god; that the coronation could not thereafter be performed; and that while Babylonian chroniclers went on calling the last ruler of Assyria its king, contemporary Assyrian documents appear to have gone on calling him crown prince. That reading rests on a small body of archival material and one scholar's reconstruction of it, and it will be tested rather than assumed. But if it holds, then the warrant was not a formula at all. It was load-bearing to the very end, and when the building fell, there was no longer any way to make a king.

A note on sources. All extended quotations of Assyrian royal inscription are taken exactly from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), which is out of copyright: Adad-nirari II's annals (§§ 356–366) for the titulary, the self-declaration, and the cities "torn from Assyria," "restored to the territory of Assyria," and the rebuilding of Apku; Ashur-dan II (§§ 352–353) for the Metal-Workers' Gate; Ilu-shuma (§ 26) in full; Shalmaneser I (§ 116) for the Hanigalbat campaign; Tukulti-Ninurta I (§§ 145, 171) for the capture of Kashtiliash and the 28,800 deportees; Tiglath-pileser I (§ 308) for the twenty-eighth crossing of the Euphrates; and the Babylonian chronicle passage on Tukulti-Ninurta's sack of Babylon

and his murder (§ 141), which Luckenbill prints from King's edition. **Three flags on the face of these quotations.** Luckenbill's rendering of the royal title as "prefect of Enlil, priest of Assur" is a century old; the modern reading is "appointee of the god Enlil, vice-regent of the god Ashur." Luckenbill spells the divine element *Urta* where modern editions read *Ninurta*, so his "Tukulti-Urta" is Tukulti-Ninurta. And his reading of Shalmaneser I's 14,400 as prisoners "overthrew and took as living captives" is now generally replaced by a reading in which the king claims to have blinded them; the modern reading is probably correct and the figure in either case is a royal claim, not a count.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The Tiglath-pileser I chronicle fragment on famine, cannibalism and the Aramean seizure of Assyrian cities is paraphrased from J.-J. Glassner's *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta, 2004), text CM 15, and is not quoted. Ashur-dan II's annalistic passage on returning the exhausted people of Assyria is paraphrased from A. K. Grayson's edition in the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia series, which postdates Luckenbill. The Amarna material — Ashur-uballit I's approach to Egypt (EA 15) and the Babylonian king's objection concerning "my Assyrian vassals" (EA 9) — follows W. L. Moran's standard edition and is given in paraphrase apart from that three-word phrase. The coronation exclamation *"Ashur is king! Ashur is king!"* and its survival into Ashurbanipal's coronation hymn follow C. Ambos's account of ancient Near Eastern royal ritual and S. W. Holloway's study of Assyrian religion and power; the ritual's own purpose — investiture to kingship, or to the priestly office, and whether performed once or annually — is genuinely unsettled and is presented as such. The climate and agricultural figures (rainfall of roughly 200–300 mm across the heartland, interannual variability of 40–60 per cent, the "zone of uncertainty," and crop sensitivity across the 200–400 mm band) follow Sinha and colleagues in *Science Advances* (2019) and the dry-farming literature descending from Wilkinson; the Middle Assyrian archival picture follows Postgate; the identification of the Chaldean and Aramean tribal houses follows Brinkman and the Oracc project's synthesis.

Weakest links, stated plainly. The date of Assur's earliest occupation is being actively revised: a radiocarbon determination of c. 2896–2702 BC published by Altaweel and colleagues in 2026 conflicts with the ED III date (c. 2600–2340) that most twentieth-century scholarship assumed, and the range is given here rather than a figure. Whether the *Uruatri* of Adad-nirari II's titulary is the ninth-century kingdom of Urartu is disputed and is not assumed. Whether deportation before the eighth century was systematic policy or occasional practice is contested — Radner traces resettlement policy from 934, others hold that it becomes state policy only under

Tiglath-pileser III — and this study takes no position yet beyond the plain fact that the instrument existed and had been used at five-figure scale in the thirteenth century. Puzur-Sin's denunciation of the Amorite line rests on a single inscription of uncertain date. And the reading of the last Assyrian ruler as an uncrowned crown prince rests on a small archival dossier and Radner's reconstruction of it; it is flagged here as a proposition and will be argued, not assumed, at the close.

MODULE 1

Mighty Bronze Pickaxes

Module 1 · The Floor of Force — what the Assyrian army actually held a monopoly on, what it cost to keep, and how to read the defeats out of an archive that never records one

The thing everybody says, and why it is wrong

The standard account of Assyrian military supremacy is that the Assyrians got iron first and used it to kill people who still had bronze. It is repeated in textbooks and it is very nearly the opposite of the truth. Iron working spread across the Near East during the collapse of the Bronze Age and the centuries after it, and by the ninth century every polity Assyria fought had iron weapons — the Aramean houses had them, Urartu had them, Elam had them, Babylon had them, and the Neo-Hittite states had them. Assyria's enemies were not fighting with bronze swords. What Assyria had was not a different metal but more of the same one, which is a fact about logistics rather than about technology.

The scale of that supply can be handled. When Victor Place excavated Sargon II's palace at Dur-Sharrukin in the 1850s he opened a storeroom containing a mass of iron in ingot form so large that it was simply given away to the local blacksmiths, who turned it into sickles and cart fittings; one of them observed that apart from the famous Persian steel he had never worked better metal. The pile has been estimated, from Place's own measurements of its dimensions, at something on the order of a hundred to a hundred and sixty metric tonnes, and the range should be given rather than a figure, because the estimate depends on how densely one assumes the ingots were packed and on how much of the mass was corrosion product rather than metal. But even the low end is arresting. That is one room in one palace of one king, holding enough iron to arm tens of thousands of men, sitting in reserve.

So the question is not what weapon the Assyrians held that nobody else did. It is what they could do that nobody else could do. And the answer, run through the primary record, is not a weapon at all. It is arrival.

What crossed the Euphrates

Begin with the number, because Assyrian numbers are claims and this one is at least a claim about something checkable. In his fourteenth year — 845 BC — Shalmaneser

III recorded that he *"mustered (the people) of the whole wide land, in countless numbers. With 120,000 of my soldiers I crossed the Euphrates at its flood."*

Take the figure with the scepticism it deserves; specialists generally treat it as inflated, or as including camp followers, baggage train, and allied contingents rather than fighting men. Even discounted heavily it describes something no other state in the region could contemplate. A field force of the order of fifty thousand men, which is the more conservative modern estimate for a large Assyrian army in the field, eats. It eats every day, and it eats several tonnes of grain a day, and the animals eat more, and it is doing this six hundred kilometres from the nearest Assyrian granary in country whose inhabitants have every reason to burn the crop rather than surrender it.

The apparatus that solved this is legible in the administrative record, and the modern reconstruction of it — most fully by Tamás Dezső, whose work the following paragraphs paraphrase — describes something that looks less like a warband than like a ministry. The core was the *kiṣir šarrūti*, the royal corps: a standing force under the king's own command, including the bodyguard units, a thousand-strong cavalry escort, the palace chariotry, and five named "city units" recruited from Assur, Arrapha, Arzuhina, Arbela and the Aramean districts. These were full-time professionals, kept in arms all year, paid in daily rations and in land. Around that core stood the provincial troops mustered by governors, the "king's men" serving seasonally, contingents owed by vassals as a term of their submission, auxiliaries hired or drafted from tribal populations — Itu'ean archers and Gurrean spearmen, both prized — and, at the bottom, non-professional levies raised from local populations and from deportees.

The recruitment and supply of all this ran on a territorial grid. Officers called *mušarkisu*, recruitment officers, were attached to provinces and answered upward to the palace rather than sideways to the governor; the governors were obliged to build houses for them. Soldiers held service fields, and forty hectares appears often enough to look like a standard allotment; officers held larger estates; both could be inherited and both could be sold, and neither was automatically exempt from tax — one surviving complaint from a deputy governor to Sargon II turns precisely on whether a bodyguard's field was exempt, and the answer is that it was exempt only if the king had said so in a sealed document, and that any additional land he had bought was not. This is not a heroic aristocracy. It is a payroll with a land component, run by clerks, audited.

And the king had a positive concern for the sustainability of the manpower. One of Sargon's letters instructs an official to enquire into the households of soldiers killed on campaign, to write down the names of the dead and of their sons and daughters, to find any case where a widow has been reduced to a slave girl or a child to servitude, and to send him the full list. The letter's motive is not necessarily tenderness — the same

paragraph is plainly also about replacement, and about a son who has gone into conscription in place of his father — but the fact that a king of Assyria was reading returns on the dependants of dead infantrymen tells you what kind of institution this was.

The road that was made as it was walked

Now the thing itself. In 714 BC Sargon II marched north-east into the Zagros against Urartu and its client Zikirtu, and the account of that campaign — a long text addressed formally to the god Ashur, and one of the most extraordinary military documents to survive from antiquity — describes what happened when the army reached a mountain it could not walk over.

He describes marching between two high peaks through country so thickly forested that *"the traveler of whose paths never sees the light of the sun,"* and crossing one river, the Buia, *"as many as twenty-six times,"* because it wound across his line of march and he simply went through it each time. Then he came to Mount Simirria, and the text is worth having in full, because everything this module argues is in it:

> *"Mount Simirria, a large mountain peak, which stands out like the blade of a lance, raising its head above the mountains where the goddess Belit-ilani resides, whose summit reaches to the heavens above, whose root strikes downward into the midst of Arallu (the lower world); where, as on the back of a fish, there is no going side by side, and where the ascent is difficult (whether one goes) forward or backward; on whose sides gorges and precipices yawn, to look at which with the eyes, inspires fear;—its road was too rough for chariots to mount, bad for horses, and too steep to march foot soldiers (over it). ... I had (my men) carry mighty bronze pickaxes in my equipment, and they shattered the side of the high mountain as (one does in breaking) blocks of building stone, making a good road. I kept at the head of my army and made my chariots, cavalry and infantry fly over that (peak) like fierce (brave) eagles. I had the laborers (camp-followers) and sappers follow behind them. The camels and baggage asses scrambled to the summit of the peak like wild goats, natives of the mountain-(side). I brought the dense masses of Assur's hosts up the steep ascent in safety, and set my camp in order on top of that mountain."*

Strip the poetry and what remains is an inventory. The pickaxes were *in my equipment* — carried as standard issue, not improvised. There was a distinct body of labourers and sappers who followed the fighting troops, which is to say the army contained an engineer arm as an organised component. There were camels and baggage

asses as a train, and they went up the road the pickaxes had cut. And the whole formation — chariots, cavalry, infantry, engineers, transport — arrived on the summit as a unit and made camp there. Then, the text goes on, he crossed seven more mountains, and forded two rivers in flood as though they were irrigation ditches.

This is the Assyrian monopoly, and it is a monopoly on road-building under arms. The same capacity shows up wherever the record is detailed enough. Rivers were crossed on rafts buoyed with inflated goatskins — Shalmaneser III records taking the Euphrates that way — and where speed mattered the army moved at night: Ashurnasirpal II crossed the Tigris on rafts with his chariots and picked cavalry, *"All night I marched,"* and was at the walls of Pitura by dawn. The Euphrates and the Tigris had no bridges. Assyria crossed them as a matter of routine, with an army, in flood.

The ramp

The other half of arriving is what happens when you get there and find a wall.

Every power in the region had walls; almost none could take them. This is the ordinary condition of ancient warfare, and it is why so much of it consists of ravaging the countryside and going home. The Assyrian answer was the assault ramp, and one specimen of it survives — the only siege ramp yet identified from the whole of the ancient Near East — at Tel Lachish, the Judaean fortress Sennacherib stormed in 701 BC.

The archaeology, excavated by David Ussishkin between the 1970s and the 1990s, puts the ramp against the south-west corner of the mound, about fifty metres wide at its base and rising to the height of the city wall. Its volume has been estimated at between six and a half and nine and a half thousand cubic metres, which is somewhere between thirteen and nineteen thousand tonnes of stone and fill, quarried nearby and moved by hand. Popular accounts give higher figures and a stone count in the millions; the excavator's range is the one to use, and it should be given as a range. Inside the wall the defenders raised a counter-ramp to keep the height advantage, which failed. Area R produced eight hundred and fifty-nine arrowheads, and a fragment of the iron chain from an Assyrian ram.

Read the arithmetic from the Judaean side of the wall. Fifteen thousand tonnes of stone were carried, under archery, by a labour force working in shifts, over a period the excavator's evidence suggests was measured in weeks rather than months. There is no defence against that except relief from outside, and Judah's ally in Egypt did not come in time. The ram and the ramp are frequently described as Assyrian military technology, and the description is misleading in the same way as the iron: the ram is simple, the ramp is simpler still, and neither is a secret. What was scarce was the ability

to hold fifty thousand men fed and disciplined in one place, in someone else's country, long enough to build one — which is the logistics again, in a stationary form.

Knowing before the enemy knows

The last component is the least visible and possibly the most important, and it is the one whose date matters most.

Assyria built a network of state highways — *hūl šarri*, the king's road — probably out of the campaign routes, and expanded them most heavily between the reigns of Shalmaneser III and Tiglath-pileser III. Along them, at intervals of roughly thirty-five to forty kilometres, provincial governors were required to maintain stations. Official despatches travelled by relay: a rider carried the letter one stage, handed it at the station to a fresh rider with fresh animals, and turned back. The riders were soldiers and the animals were mules, chosen because a mule has a horse's strength with a donkey's toughness and swims well, which matters in a country of unbridged rivers; a rider typically travelled with two, so that a lame animal did not strand the message.

Access was rationed. The system carried only despatches under the royal seal, which showed the king fighting a lion and was held by something like a hundred and fifty senior officials — the "Great Ones" of Assyria. Karen Radner, whose reconstruction this paraphrases, estimates that a letter from the western frontier province of Quwê, near modern Adana, reached the Assyrian heartland in under five days: seven hundred kilometres as the crow flies, across the Euphrates, the Tigris and a good many tributaries, none of them bridged. Her judgement is that this speed was not matched again in the region until the telegraph reached the Ottoman empire in 1865, and that the communications system may be Assyria's single most important contribution to the art of government. It should be said that no road station has yet been excavated; the whole reconstruction rests on textual evidence, and that limitation belongs on the page.

The consequence for the floor is direct. An army that can arrive is only half of a deterrent; the other half is knowing where to go, and going before the situation has consolidated. A revolt in the far west that reaches Nineveh in four days and meets an army already mustered is a different proposition from one that reaches the capital in three weeks and finds it harvesting. The relay converted the Assyrian army from a seasonal instrument into something closer to a standing threat, and it is worth noticing what it also converted the governors into: men whose despatches the king could check against one another at speed.

The army eats the armies it beats

There is one more mechanism, and it is the one that made the instrument compound.

Assyria did not merely destroy the forces it defeated. It absorbed them, by unit, and put them in the royal corps. The record of this is precise. Tiglath-pileser III drafted the chariotry of Rezin of Damascus after taking the city in 732. Sargon II took fifty chariots from Samaria in 722, two hundred chariots and six hundred horsemen from Qarqar in 721, thirty chariots from Shinuhtu in 718, fifty chariots and two hundred cavalry from Carchemish in 717, and a hundred chariots from Bit-Puritish in 713. These were not prisoners set to labour. They were professional soldiers, enlisted as soldiers, because the Assyrians had correctly identified that a trained chariot crew is a scarce asset regardless of who trained it.

And they kept their identity. The Nimrud Horse Lists, administrative texts drawn up for a muster in 709 BC, still name a unit called the *Sāmerināia* — the Samarians. Twelve years after the fall of the city, in an Assyrian army list, the unit is still under its own name, and something over eighty per cent of the officers named in it still bear West Semitic names. A *Ḫamatāia* unit from Hamath shows the same pattern, almost entirely West Semitic. The Assyrian officer corps as a whole was about two-thirds ethnically Assyrian by name, and the bodyguard units much more so, which is exactly what one would expect of a state that wanted foreign professionals in the ranks and its own men holding the keys.

This is the engine of an accelerating conquest and it needs no doctrine to explain it. Every kingdom Assyria beat made the Assyrian army larger and more various; each addition extended the radius within which the next arrival was possible; and the pattern of Assyrian expansion, which looks from a distance like an appetite, is in the detail a compounding return on a single capacity. It also installs a liability that will matter three centuries later, and the module states it now without arguing it: by the seventh century, the force holding the empire together was in large part not Assyrian, and its officers held land and lived in the provinces where they served.

What the terror was for

None of the above is what Assyria is remembered for. What it is remembered for is this, and it should be read at the length the record gives it rather than summarised into a phrase.

In his first campaign Ashurnasirpal II came to Suru in Bit-Halupe, whose people had killed their governor and set up a man named Ahiababa in his place. Having

installed a governor of his own choosing and stripped the city, he recorded what he did next:

> *"I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I flayed, and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled. Ahiababa I took to Nineveh, I flayed him, I spread his skin upon the wall of Nineveh."*

At Kinabu, in the following year, against a garrison of Assyrian settlers who had revolted: *"600 of their warriors I put to the sword; 3,000 captives I burned with fire; I did not leave a single one among them alive to serve as a hostage."* And at Tela, a town of three walls whose people *"trusted in their mighty walls and in their hosts, and did not come down, and did not embrace my feet"*:

> *"3,000 of their warriors I put to the sword... Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers(?), of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living, and another of heads, and I bound their heads to posts (tree trunks) round about the city."*

These things happened, and the register in which they are described is not confession but advertisement. But an atrocity is not an explanation, and the analytic questions are what the terror was *for*, what it cost, and whether it worked.

What it was for is answered in the text itself, if one reads on past the horror. The pillar at Suru was built *over against his city gate* — where the people who use the gate will see it. Ahiababa's skin went to Nineveh, six hundred kilometres away, where nobody involved in his revolt would ever see it and where every visiting vassal and Assyrian courtier would. And what immediately follows in the same passage is the transaction the display was for: *"My power and might I established over the land of Laqe. While I was staying in the city of Suru, (I received) tribute from all the kings of the land of Laqe."* The audience for the flaying of Ahiababa was not Suru. Suru had already been dealt with. The audience was every other king of Laqe who had not yet decided, and they paid, and the annal records their payment in the next clause. The terror is a pricing instrument, aimed forward.

Did it work? Partly, and the failure is on the same page as the success. In the second year's campaign the surviving men of Nirbu came down from the hills and *"embraced*

my feet," and were resettled and taxed. And then, in the same season, on his return march, Nirbu revolted again, abandoned nine of its own towns, and had to be stormed a second time in the mountains. Which locates the real cost of a floor built on demonstrated terror. Terror is not a possession. It is a memory, and memories decay, and the only way to renew one is to come back — which is why the Assyrian campaign is annual, why the eponym lists read as a nearly unbroken record of marching, and why a king who did not campaign was not merely idle but, in the terms of his own office, impious.

What the army could not do — and how to read it

An empire whose archive never records a defeat still had defeats, and they are recoverable, because the annals record them in a consistent and legible way: by changing the verb.

When an Assyrian king takes a place, the vocabulary is unmistakable and always the same cluster. He *stormed* it, *captured* it, *destroyed*, *devastated*, *burned it with fire*, *turned it into a mound and a ruin heap*. When he does not take it, the vocabulary shifts to a different cluster, equally formulaic: he *shut up* the enemy in his city, *slew many before the gates*, *set up my royal image* in front of it, *received tribute*, and marched on.

Watch it operate. Tiglath-pileser III against Sarduri of Urartu: *"He became frightened at the fury of my arms and ran away, alone, to save his life. In Turushpa, his city, I shut him up and slew many of his warriors before his (city's) gates. My royal image I set up in front of Turushpa."* The next sentence has him marching victoriously through the whole land of Urartu, from its upper to its lower border, finding none to oppose him. He did not take Tushpa. No Assyrian king ever took Tushpa. It sat on a rock above Lake Van and there was no way to put a ramp against it, and the empire's answer to a fortress it could not reduce was to devastate everything around it and erect a statue outside the gate.

The same limit shows against water. Tyre sat on an island. Shalmaneser V and Sargon II blockaded it across four or five years; Sennacherib drove its king Luli to flee overseas in 701 but did not take the city; Esarhaddon besieged it around 671; Ashurbanipal again around 663. The greatest siege army in the world attacked the same small island four times across sixty years and never stormed it, and settled each time for a blockade, a submission, and a tribute. In 701, likewise, Sennacherib's prism claims to have shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage and lists what was subsequently paid; it does not claim to have taken the city, and its silence there is not modesty.

The pattern is a single one. The Assyrian floor failed exactly where the ramp could not be built — the island, the crag — and it failed nowhere else. Which is the strongest possible confirmation that the monopoly was on engineering rather than on force: remove the ground on which earth can be piled, and the most formidable army in the world is reduced to sitting outside and waiting.

And there is a limit sharper than any of these, and it is the one the Assyrians themselves found hardest to look at. In 705 BC Sargon II — the king of the bronze pickaxes, the man who had taken his army over Simirria — was killed on campaign in Tabal, and his body was not recovered. He had finished his new capital the year before and had never lived in it. His son abandoned it and moved to Nineveh, and a later text takes up, in fragmentary and much-argued form, the question of which sin had caused a king of Assyria to die unburied on a foreign mountain. The army that could carry a hundred thousand men across a range no chariot could climb could not bring its own king home.

Reading the floor against the framework

This study opened by establishing that almost nothing in the Assyrian state of 911 was new — that the god, the vice-regency, the provincial governorate, the annals as a genre, and even the deportation of populations at five-figure scale were all Middle Assyrian bequests, absorbed by the ninth-century kings in childhood as the shape of the world rather than selected from a menu of options. The floor of force is the first thing in this study that is genuinely an addition, and it is worth naming precisely what the addition was.

It was not a weapon. Everyone had iron, and the hundred-odd tonnes in Sargon's storeroom is a fact about supply and not about secrecy. It was not, in any simple sense, numbers, since the 120,000 is a claim and the coalition at Qarqar fielded a comparable force. **What Assyria monopolised was the capacity to arrive** — to move a very large body of men with its food, animals and engineers six hundred kilometres from home, to cut road through country that had none, to cross unbridged rivers in flood, to reduce a walled city on arrival by building fifteen thousand tonnes of earthwork against it under fire, and to know where it needed to go four days after the event rather than three weeks. The collection's existing account of the floor asks what force a coalition held and how it was organised. This case suggests a distinct type, and the study proposes it here for testing against later cases: **the floor of reach**, where the monopoly is not on the instrument of violence but on the ability to deliver it at distance.

Three consequences follow, and each is a claim that can be checked rather than a restatement of the term.

First, a floor of reach has a boundary that is a radius rather than a line, and it will fail wherever the delivery mechanism cannot operate regardless of how strong the state is. The prediction is precise and the record confirms it: Assyria failed at Tushpa and at Tyre, at the crag and at the island, and essentially nowhere else. An empire whose limit is set by its engineering rather than by its enemies is a distinctive kind of empire, and its map should be read as the print of a capability, not the outcome of a contest.

Second, a floor of reach must be demonstrated rather than merely possessed. An unexercised capacity is not a credible threat, and a threat that is not credible does not price anything — so the deterrent has to be re-performed, at cost, on a schedule. This is the structural reason the Assyrian campaign is annual, and it is the reason the atrocity is published: the pillar at the gate and the skin on the wall of Nineveh are not the emotional overflow of a cruel people but the cheapest available means of extending the demonstration to audiences the army has not yet reached. The corollary is the expensive one. **A floor that must be re-proved every season is not an asset the state owns but an appetite the state must feed**, and an empire built on one cannot stop expanding without beginning to look, to its own subjects, as though it has stopped being able to.

Third, this floor compounded, because it consumed the floors it defeated. Damascus's chariotry, Samaria's chariotry, Carchemish's cavalry and Hamath's horsemen were not scattered but enlisted, kept as named units, and left under their own officers — the Samarian unit still on the Assyrian books, still under West Semitic officers, twelve years after Samaria fell. Each conquest therefore enlarged the instrument that produced the next one, which is the mechanism behind an expansion that looks from outside like insatiability and is from inside simply a return on capital. It also planted a debt: the force holding the empire was increasingly not Assyrian, and its officers held estates in the provinces where they served rather than at the centre.

One methodological finding attaches, and it will be used repeatedly in what follows. **In an archive whose genre forbids the recording of defeat, the defeats are nonetheless on the page, encoded as a change of formula.** The Assyrian scribes had no vocabulary for failure and were not permitted to invent one, so they wrote what they could truthfully write: the king shut the enemy up, killed men before the gate, set up his image, and received tribute. Every element of that is accurate and none of it says the city was taken, and the difference between that cluster and the *stormed–captured–burned* cluster is completely regular across three centuries. A monopolised record is therefore not an opaque one. It is a constrained one, and the constraint leaves a shape. Where a study finds an order that has controlled its own account of itself absolutely,

the instruction is not to despair of the archive but to find the thing the archive could not say and then look for the form of words it used instead of saying it.

Legibility is not pardon, and this module has quoted at length what was done to the people of Tela in order to be able to ask what it was for. The answer — that it was aimed at the next town rather than at this one, and that its purpose was to make a payment arrive without a siege — makes the burning of three thousand people intelligible as policy. It does not make it anything else. And it is worth ending on the accounting the Assyrians themselves would not have disputed: the pillar of the living at the gate of Tela bought a season's tribute from Laqe, and by the end of the same campaign the country it was built in had risen again and had to be stormed a second time.

A note on sources. All extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), which is out of copyright: Sargon II's eighth campaign and the crossing of Mount Simirria (vol. II, § 142) and the twenty-six crossings of the Buia (§ 141); Shalmaneser III's 120,000 and the crossing of the Euphrates in flood (vol. I, § 658) and the goat-skin rafts (§ 599 ff.); Ashurnasirpal II at Suru (§ 443), at Kinabu and Tela (§§ 445–446), and the night march to Pitura (§ 463); Tiglath-pileser III at Turushpa (§ 785). **Flag on the face of these:** Luckenbill's transliterations and some renderings are a century old, and where a phrase carries analytic weight the modern editions in the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period series should be preferred; his figures are in every case the perpetrator's own claim, carved at royal expense, and are treated here as claims. The 120,000 in particular is generally read by specialists as inflated or as counting the whole train rather than combatants, and is used here only to establish an order of magnitude.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The structure of the army — the royal corps, the bodyguard and city units, the provincial and vassal troops, the auxiliary Itu'eans and Gurreans, the recruitment officers and their territorial grid, the service-field and ration systems, the exemption dispute over a bodyguard's field, and Sargon's letter on the households of dead soldiers — follows Tamás Dezső, *The Assyrian Army* I–II (Budapest, 2012–16), together with the editions of Fales and Postgate in the State Archives of Assyria series. The drafting of defeated contingents (Damascus 732; Samaria, Qarqar, Shinuhtu, Carchemish, Bit-Puritish, 722–713) and the survival of the *Sāmerināia* and *Ḫamatāia* units in the Nimrud Horse Lists of 709 follow Dezső and Dalley. The communications system — the king's road, the relay, the mule, the stations at thirty-five to forty kilometres, the royal seal and the roughly one hundred and fifty authorised officials, and the estimate of under five days from Quwê — follows Karen Radner's published work on the imperial communication network,

with Kessler on the road system; **no road station has been excavated, and the entire reconstruction is textual.** The Lachish siege ramp follows David Ussishkin's excavation reports; the ramp's volume (c. 6,500–9,500 m^3, c. 13,000–19,000 tonnes) and the 859 arrowheads from Area R are his figures, and higher tonnages and stone-counts circulating in popular accounts are not used. The Khorsabad iron hoard is known only from Victor Place's nineteenth-century description and measurements, the metal itself having been dispersed to local smiths or lost in the river; the tonnage is a back-calculation from those measurements and is given as a range of roughly 100 to 160 tonnes, which is the weakest figure in this module.

Other weak links, stated plainly. The claim that iron was widely available to Assyria's opponents rests on the general archaeometallurgical literature rather than on a comparative survey, and a study that overturned it would damage the argument's opening move. The *Sāmerināia* identification depends on reading personal names as ethnic markers, which Dezső himself flags as unreliable in individual cases though defensible statistically. The reading of the *shut-up / set-up-my-image* formula as a systematic marker of failure is this study's own generalisation from a consistent pattern and is offered for testing; it is not a claim that every occurrence of the formula marks a failure, only that no occurrence of it marks a capture. And the fragmentary text on the death of Sargon II is a literary composition of contested date, authorship and interpretation, and nothing here rests on it beyond the undisputed facts that he was killed on campaign in 705 and that his body was not brought back.

MODULE 2

As Assyrians I Counted Them

Module 2 · The Settlement — the two legal statuses a conquered people could hold, what each owed for it, who was exempt, and the one term of the bargain a king could not break and keep his throne

Two ways of belonging to Ashur

Assyrian scribes had two distinct formulas for what happened to a people the army had beaten, and the difference between them is the whole architecture of the settlement.

The first is the *yoke*. A defeated king who submitted in time kept his throne, his gods, his court, his law and his revenues, and in exchange he bore the yoke of Ashur: an annual tribute assessed and delivered, troops supplied on demand, a sworn oath, the surrender of any independent dealing with other powers, and in many cases a son at the Assyrian court as a hostage and a resident Assyrian representative watching him at home. Ashurnasirpal II's account of Laqe gives the transaction in its ordinary form — silver, gold, lead, copper, copper vessels, cattle, sheep, dyed woollens and linen received as tribute, the rate *"increased"* and imposed, and, of some of the same people, *"their sons I took as hostages."* This was cheap. It required no Assyrian administration on the ground, and for two centuries it was what Assyria preferred.

The second formula is annexation, and the Akkadian phrase for it is worth having because it is spatial rather than political: the land was *returned within the border of the land of Ashur*. The kingdom ceased to exist. Its king was removed or executed, an Assyrian official was installed as governor, and the population passed into a different legal condition — which Sargon II's inscriptions state in a clause that recurs almost mechanically. Of Gurgum, after he had disposed of its king: *"The people of Gurgum, to its farthest border, I pardoned once more (lit., anew) and my official I set as governor over them. As Assyrians I counted them."* Of a set of restored cities repopulated from the east: *"[I] set my official over them as governor; with the people of Assyria I counted them, and they bore (drew) my yoke."* And in the summary titulary that gathers his whole reign into a paragraph: *"who set his officials as governors over all their lands, and numbered them among the people of Assyria."*

What does it mean to be counted among the people of Assyria? Sargon's own scribes answer the question directly, in another titulary, and the answer is the settlement's

founding legal fiction stated without embarrassment: *"who has smashed all lands like pots, and has cast bonds upon the four regions (of the world), who set his officials over them as governors, and imposed upon them tribute and taxes like (those imposed) upon the Assyrians."*

That is the clause. Being made an Assyrian and being made liable are not cause and effect; they are the same operation described twice. The conquered were not admitted to a status which then carried obligations. The obligations *were* the status, and "counted" carries in English very nearly the double sense the Akkadian carries — reckoned as, and enumerated for. Name the fiction as fiction and it looks like pure cynicism.

But it is not pure cynicism, and this is where a study has to be careful, because a fiction of this kind does something over generations that its authors did not necessarily intend. A people counted as Assyrians acquired real things along with the tax bill: their soldiers served in named units under officers of their own, as the Samarians and the Hamatheans did; their men could hold service fields on the same terms as anyone else; their notables could and did rise into the imperial administration, and by the seventh century something like a third of the officers whose names survive in the army lists were not Assyrian by name at all. A legal fiction that is enforced for a century stops being experienced as a fiction. It becomes the description of how things are. That is precisely how a built order turns into the furniture of the world, and it is the reason the Assyrian settlement was more durable than a straightforward extortion racket would have been.

What a province owed, and to whom

Underneath the formula lay a working fiscal apparatus, reconstructed most fully by Nicholas Postgate, whose account the following paraphrases. A province was headed by a governor appointed by the king and removable by him, and it owed a bundle of obligations that fell into three kinds.

There were taxes in kind on agricultural produce — a corn tax and a straw tax, levied as a proportion of the harvest and collected by the provincial administration — together with levies on livestock and a quota system by which a province delivered specified goods to the crown: horses above all, but also metals, textiles and timber according to what the district produced. There was labour, the *ilku*, which is the term that covers both corvée on state projects and service in the levy, and which attached to the holding of land rather than to the person. And there was the obligation to sustain the machinery of empire as it passed through: to feed the army at muster and on the march, to maintain the road stations and their riders and mules, and to house the

crown's recruitment officers, who answered to the palace and not to the governor in whose province they worked.

The land system under all of this was the same one described in the previous module from the army's side. Soldiers held service fields, forty hectares appearing often enough to look standard; officers held estates; both were heritable and both were saleable. Exemption existed but was not a class privilege — it had to be granted specifically, by the king, in a sealed document. One surviving letter from a deputy governor to Sargon II turns on exactly this point: he had tried to collect the corn tax from a royal bodyguard's land and had been refused, and he wrote to the king to say, in effect, that a bodyguard is not automatically exempt, that a man claiming exemption must produce the sealed order, and that any additional fields the bodyguard had bought on the open market were certainly taxable. He needed the barley to feed the pack animals coming through.

The consequence of that system, worked out over a century, is visible in the private archives, and it is worth pausing on because it explains a great deal about later modules. In 663 BC the chief chariot driver of Ashurbanipal bought an entire village. Its owners, selling collectively, were the deputy of a town, the scribe of the queen mother, a chariot driver, a "third man," three chariot warriors and three cohort commanders — which is to say the village was owned outright by the local military establishment. A cohort commander named Kakkullānu bought his neighbour's house in Nineveh; his neighbours on either side were other officers, and when he leased land in the countryside his boundaries ran against the fields of two more cohort commanders, a commander-of-fifty, and the eponym official of 623. These men were not an aristocracy in the older sense. They were a service class whose wealth was in land, whose land had come from the crown, whose neighbours were their colleagues, and whose fortunes were bound to the state continuing to win.

The men who could not have sons

At the top of that structure stood a small group of officers whom the Assyrians themselves called the Great Ones, numbering perhaps a hundred and twenty to a hundred and fifty, and above them, in a category of their own, seven or so great offices of state: the commander-in-chief, the palace herald, the chief cupbearer, the treasurer, the vizier, the chief judge, and the chief eunuch. These men held office and a province simultaneously, and their provinces were mostly on the frontier, where the troops were. The annual eponymate rotated among them in a fixed sequence following the king's own year, which means that the Assyrian calendar was itself a roster of the settlement: to name the year was to recite the order of precedence.

And a substantial part of the imperial officer class consisted of men designated *ša rēši*, literally "he of the head," conventionally translated eunuch, and set in the texts against *ša ziqni*, "he of the beard." In the palace reliefs the contrast is systematic and unmissable: beardless officials with smooth rounded faces stand beside bearded ones, and the pairing of the two terms came to serve as shorthand for the whole body of Assyrian officialdom.

Whether *ša rēši* always denotes physical castration is genuinely contested, and the contest belongs on the page rather than in the footnote. Luis Siddall and others have argued that the Neo-Assyrian evidence for castration is thinner than the standard account assumes and that "courtier" may often be the better rendering; against that stand the Middle Assyrian legal provision that an adulterer might be made into a *ša rēši*, the iconographic contrast, and a prophecy composed for Ashurbanipal that distinguishes the *sons* of those of the beard from the *successors* of those of the head — a distinction that is hard to read as anything but a distinction between men who could beget and men who could not. This study takes no position on the philology beyond noting that it is unsettled.

The structural point survives either way, and it is the one that matters. The Assyrian state maintained, at the very top of its administration and army, a category of officer defined by inability to found a line. Look at what the settlement had created and the logic is not mysterious: heritable land grants, plus provincial governorships, plus standing military command, adds up to a magnate with wealth, an army and a son. Every one of those in isolation is manageable. Together they are a dynasty in waiting. Staffing the summit with men who cannot pass anything on is not a theory of government; it is a patch applied to a failure mode the settlement itself had generated. And, as patches do, it created a new failure mode of its own, since the Chief Eunuch came to command a division of the royal corps — enormous power in the hands of a man who could not found a dynasty but was extremely well placed to make one. That is a thread for later.

The banquet, read as a document

In 879 BC Ashurnasirpal II finished his new capital at Kalhu and set up a stele outside the throne-room entrance recording what he did to celebrate. The stone was found in 1951 and its modern name is the Banquet Stele.

The numbers, in the king's own accounting, are these: forty-seven thousand and seventy-four men and women summoned from every part of his land; five thousand dignitaries and envoys from twelve named foreign countries — Suhu, Hindanu, Patinu, Hatti, Tyre, Sidon, Gurgum, Melid, Hubushkia, Gilzanu, Kummu and

Musasir; sixteen thousand people of Kalhu; and fifteen hundred officials of his palaces. Sixty-nine thousand five hundred and seventy-four in all, fed and given drink for ten days, bathed, anointed, and sent home in peace. The stele then itemises the provisions at obsessive length — hundreds of oxen, thousands upon thousands of sheep, deer, birds and fish, ten thousand jars of beer and ten thousand skins of wine, and mule-loads of vegetables, spices and preserved fruit.

The total is generally treated as inflated, and the scepticism is well placed; nobody counted sixty-nine thousand people through a gate. But the interesting thing about the stele is not the arithmetic. It is the categories, which are given in order, and the order is the settlement's own ranking of itself: the free population of the land of Ashur first, then the foreign delegations, then the inhabitants of the new capital, then the palace establishment. It is a table of estates, drawn up by the estate at the top.

Read it also for who is absent. There is no line for the peasantry of the outer provinces, none for the subjects of vassals, and none for deportees as a category. And yet the sixteen thousand people of Kalhu were in substantial part deportees, because Ashurnasirpal had built his capital and then filled it with populations moved there from the lands he had conquered. The feast therefore included, without naming them, the people he had uprooted — seated in the city they had been brought to, eating at the expense of the man who had brought them. Ten days of that, with five thousand foreign envoys watching, is not hospitality. It is the settlement exhibited to itself and to the people expected to buy into it, and it is a good deal cheaper than another campaign.

What the deportee held

Which raises the strangest ledger in this study, and the module states its terms here and reserves its meaning for later.

A deported family had lost everything: land, town, kin network, the graves of its ancestors, and any prospect of return. What it received in exchange was not slavery. Deportees were settled — given a place in a district generally richer than the one they came from, with land, a house, and the tools and animals to work with. They were counted, taxed, liable to the corn tax and the labour service and the levy like anybody else, and their sons were recruited into the army under officers of their own community. In the empire's own legal terms, a deportee from a defeated hill kingdom had been *promoted*: he had gone from being the subject of a petty king with no standing in the world to being counted among the people of Assyria.

Sargon II describes the process at Dur-Sharrukin without a flicker of apology. He carried off, he says, *"Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland,"* and then: *"I unified them (made*

them of one mouth) and settled them therein. Assyrians, fully competent to teach them how to fear god and the king, I dispatched to them as scribes and sheriffs (superintendents)."

The last sentence is the most important thing in this study and it is not this module's business; it belongs where formation is examined. What belongs here is the legal shape of the bargain: land, tools, a household, a status, a tax bill, and an instructor — and no road home. Whether that was a good bargain is a question about a particular man's life and it will be asked, at length, when the cost column is drawn up. It is enough to say now that it was a real bargain and not merely a euphemism, that it is unlike almost anything else in this collection, and that a great many deportees appear in the archives some decades later holding fields, witnessing contracts and giving Assyrian names to their children.

The invoice

Now the term that could not be broken.

Set two passages of Sargon II side by side. They come from the same reign, sometimes from the same inscription, and the juxtaposition is not something a modern reader has to construct — an Assyrian scribe put them in successive clauses of a single titulary.

The first is the one already quoted: the king *"who set his officials over them as governors, and imposed upon them tribute and taxes like (those imposed) upon the Assyrians."*

The second is this: *"who restored the feudal protection (clientship) of Assur, which had come to an end, who remitted the taskwork of Der and quieted its dissatisfied people; (most) powerful of all princes, who stretched out his protecting shadow over Harran, and wrote (the charter of) its freedom,—at the desire of Anu and Adad."* And in the Khorsabad annals, in plainer words: *"The freedom (from taxes) of the cities of Assur and Harran, which had been overlooked (lit., forgotten) since the days of old and whose feudal protection (clientship) had ceased, I restored."*

So: being counted as an Assyrian means paying Assyrian taxes — unless one is an Assyrian of Assur or Harran, in which case being an Assyrian means paying nothing. The word Luckenbill renders as "freedom" or "clientship" is *kidinnu* and its associated status *kidinnūtu*, a condition of divine protection which carried, in practice, exemption from the corn tax, from the corvée, and from the levy. It belonged to a small number of ancient cult cities, and Assyrian kings extended it southward as a political instrument: Sargon granted or restored privileges and debt remissions to Sippar,

Nippur, Babylon, Borsippa, Der, Ur, Uruk, Eridu, Larsa and others, buying with fiscal concessions what he did not want to buy with an army.

And now the sharp fact. Sargon II took the throne in 722 in circumstances that were almost certainly a coup; the Babylonian chronicle has Shalmaneser V dying in the month of Tebet and Sargon acceding seventeen days later, and it is doubtful that Sargon was of the royal line at all — if he was not, Shalmaneser V was the last king of a dynasty that had held Assyria for the better part of a thousand years. A usurper in that position needs a justification, and Sargon's court produced one: a text known as the Assur Charter, in which the case against his predecessor is laid out. The charge is that Shalmaneser V did not revere the city of Assur, that he imposed corvée and labour service upon its citizens in violation of their ancient status, and that the god Ashur consequently withdrew his support and destroyed him.

Handle this correctly. It is the usurper's own document, written by the beneficiary of the death it explains, and it may be a fabrication from beginning to end; there is no independent evidence that Shalmaneser V taxed Assur. But the propaganda value of a charge depends on the charge being both grave and plausible to the audience it is aimed at, and the audience here was the Assyrian governing class. Sargon's people, choosing what to say to make a usurpation acceptable to the men who would have to accept it, chose *he taxed the god's city.* They could have chosen incompetence, impiety in general, defeat in the field, or Babylonian policy. They chose the fiscal violation, and they thought it would work.

That tells us the shape of the settlement's non-negotiable term whether or not Shalmaneser ever breached it. The king could tax anyone he had conquered and describe the taxing as citizenship. He could not tax the city whose god's steward he was. The exemption was not a favour the crown granted at pleasure; it was a claim against the crown, enforceable not by any court but by the willingness of the Assyrian elite to treat its violation as sufficient grounds for removing a king — and Esarhaddon, two generations later, thought it worth recording that he had set the *kidinnu* up in the gates of Assur *forever*.

Reading the settlement against the framework

This study has argued so far that the Assyrian order was a naturalised inheritance rather than a design, and that the one thing genuinely added in the ninth century was reach. It has also proposed that Assyria's warrant was anchored in a place — a god who was a city, a steward who could move his residence but not his god, and a coronation that opened by denying that the man acceding was king. Module 2 shows what that anchoring cost, and the finding is the compounding one.

A warrant anchored in something outside the holder generates a standing claim against the holder, and the same externality that makes the warrant durable is what makes it expensive.

Work it through. A warrant the holder can issue himself — *I am the strongest, therefore I rule and I say who owns what* — costs nothing to maintain and secures nothing, because a say-so cannot underwrite itself and everyone knows it. A warrant anchored in something the holder appears subject to is credible precisely because the subjection is visible, and visible subjection means a visible claim. If the king holds the land as Ashur's steward, then Ashur's own city is not the king's to tax. That is not a sentimental conclusion; it is an accounting entry, and it fell due every year. The exemptions of Assur and Harran are the annual invoice for three centuries of legitimacy, and the Assur Charter is what happened, or what could credibly be said to have happened, when a king declined to pay it.

Two observations follow and both feed the same finding rather than standing beside it.

The first is about the fiction. The settlement's central legal fiction — that incorporation and liability are one act, that to be counted among the people of Assyria *is* to be assessed for tribute and taxes like an Assyrian — is exactly the kind of formula this collection exists to name as a fiction. But naming it is not the end of the analysis, because the fiction was enforced consistently enough, for long enough, to become partly true. A Hamathean whose grandfather was counted as an Assyrian at spearpoint served in a unit of Hamatheans under Hamathean officers, held a service field, paid the corn tax like his Assyrian neighbour, and gave his son an Assyrian name. The distance between a fiction and a fact is measured in generations of enforcement, and this is the mechanism by which a settlement imposed by force turns into a settlement the settled defend.

The second is about the exempt city as an instrument, and it points forward. A privileged city is not charity and it is not merely a bribe to a priesthood. It is the cheapest available public proof that the king's fiscal will has a limit — a demonstration, standing in stone at the gates of Assur, that there exists at least one thing the king cannot simply take. Every magnate and governor who saw Assur pay nothing was looking at evidence that the crown could be bound. That is a dangerous thing for a crown to display and a very valuable thing for a crown to be able to display, and the tension between those two facts is where the residue examined in a later module will come from. It should be said plainly now, because it will matter: nobody at Assur won that exemption by being poor and oppressed. It was won, and re-won, and used as a lever, by people who already had standing.

Legibility is not pardon here either. The settlement described in this module was imposed by the instrument described in the last one, and the choice offered to a defeated king was between paying tribute and ceasing to exist. But it is worth being exact about what the Assyrians built, because the usual charge against them is thoughtless rapacity and the record does not support it. They built a graduated system with two legal statuses and a menu of exemptions, they wrote it down, they audited it, they argued about whether a particular field was liable, and at the top of it they accepted — or at least found it necessary to appear to accept — a limit on the king's own reach into the purse of the god's city. That is not the behaviour of a warband. It is the behaviour of a state, and states are harder to be rid of.

A note on sources. All extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Sargon II's annexation formulas for Gurgum and for the restored cities (vol. II, §§ 30, 63), the summary titulary imposing *"tribute and taxes like (those imposed) upon the Assyrians"* and the restoration of the *kidinnu* of Assur and Harran (§§ 84, 78, 182), and the settlement of Dur-Sharrukin with peoples of foreign tongue (§ 122); Ashurnasirpal II on the tribute of Laqe and the taking of hostages (vol. I, §§ 443, 446). **Flag:** Luckenbill renders *kidinnu / kidinnūtu* as "freedom (from taxes)" and "feudal protection (clientship)," which is serviceable but dated; the status is better described as a condition of divine protection carrying fiscal and service exemptions, and modern editions should be preferred where the exact term carries weight.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The fiscal system — the corn and straw taxes, the quota deliveries, the *ilku* as a land-attached obligation covering both corvée and levy, and the sealed-decree requirement for exemption — follows J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome, 1974), together with the editions of Fales and Postgate and of Kataja and Whiting in the State Archives of Assyria series; the deputy governor's letter about the bodyguard's field is from the Nimrud letters as edited by Saggs and re-edited by Luukko. The distinction between the provinces of the "land of Ashur" and the vassals bearing the "yoke of Ashur" is Postgate's, and it should be said that recent work (Bagg, Nijssen and others) argues the boundary was blurrier in practice than the model implies and that the appearance of a governor is not always a reliable marker of annexation. The great offices and the Great Ones follow Raija Mattila, *The King's Magnates* (Helsinki, 2000); the land-holding patterns of the officer class follow Dezső and the Nineveh private archives edited by Kwasman, Parpola and Mattila. The Banquet Stele was excavated in 1951 and first published by D. J. Wiseman; the text is edited in Grayson's Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia series, and the figures and categories are given here in

paraphrase rather than quotation. The Assur Charter is edited by H. W. F. Saggs, "Historical Texts and Fragments of Sargon II of Assyria. 1: The 'Aššur Charter'," *Iraq* 37 (1975), 11–20, and its account of Shalmaneser V's imposition of corvée on Assur is at lines 31–35.

Weak links, stated plainly. The Assur Charter is a partisan document produced by the man who benefited from the death it explains, and there is no independent confirmation that Shalmaneser V taxed Assur; the argument made here does not require that he did, but a reader who thinks the charge wholly invented should note that the argument then rests on what Sargon's court judged would persuade, which is a weaker form of evidence. The 69,574 of the Banquet Stele is a royal claim and is treated as one; only the categories are used. Whether *ša rēši* denotes castration in Neo-Assyrian usage is unsettled — Siddall and Pirngruber have argued for "courtier," against the Middle Assyrian legal provision, the iconography, and the Ashurbanipal prophecy distinguishing "sons" from "successors" — and this module rests only on the structural fact of an officer category defined by inability to found a line, which the sources support on either reading. The claim that deportees were commonly settled with land, tools and a household rests on administrative and letter evidence of uneven quality, is likely to describe the better-documented cases rather than the average, and will be examined properly rather than assumed when the cost column is drawn.

MODULE 3

The Garment of a Sinner

Module 3 · The Robe — the story Assyria told about why it did what it did, the audience that story was actually addressed to, and what it cost an empire to have no word for a legitimate enemy

A despatch to the sovereign

In 714 BC Sargon II came back from the Zagros and had a report written. It survives on a tablet from Assur, now in the Louvre, and it is one of the strangest official documents to come out of the ancient world, because of who it is addressed to.

> *"Assur, father of the gods, the great lord, who dwellest in Eharsaggalkurkurra, thy great temple, hail, all hail! Ye gods of destiny, ye goddesses, who dwell in Eharsaggalkurkurra, your great temple, hail, all hail! … To the city and its people, greeting! To the palace in its midst, greeting! To Sargon, the holy priest, the servant, who fears thy great godhead, and to his camp, peace, abundant peace!"*

Anyone who has read the ordinary correspondence of the Assyrian state will recognise the shape of that immediately. It is the salutation of a provincial governor's letter to his king: greet the recipient, greet the household, greet the city, then place yourself and your command at the bottom of the list and report that all is well. Sargon has written to Ashur in exactly the form his own governors used to write to him, and he has put himself in the governor's slot — *the holy priest, the servant, who fears thy great godhead*.

What follows is a campaign narrative of extraordinary length and detail, the same text quoted earlier for the bronze pickaxes and the road cut over Simirria. And then, at the very end, after four hundred lines of mountains crossed and cities burned and the sack of the temple at Musasir, comes this:

> *"1 charioteer, 2 cavalrymen, 3 sappers, were killed:—(these) heroes (lit., men of highest words), Tab-shar-Assur, the great abarakku(-official), conducted before Assur, my lord."*

And then the colophon: the tablet of Nabu-shallim-shunu, chief scribe of the king, chief of the learned, first-born of Harmakki; in the eponymy of Ishtar-duri, governor of Arrapha; *it was brought*.

Six men dead in a campaign that had crossed eight mountain ranges and destroyed four hundred and thirty cities, named by rank, delivered before the god by a senior official of the household, in a document dated, signed by the chief scribe, and formally received.

It would be a mistake to read that as a casualty return. Luckenbill noticed a century ago that the same enumeration — one charioteer, two cavalrymen, three sappers — closes a comparable letter of Esarhaddon, and the figure appears elsewhere in the corpus as well; it is a liturgical formula, an offering of the dead rather than a count of them. But recognising it as a formula does not weaken the point. It sharpens it. The *form* of an Assyrian campaign report was an account rendered to a superior, complete with the ritual token of what the enterprise had cost, delivered in the temple by the officer responsible. Whatever else the Assyrian king was, this is the posture his own state required him to adopt at the end of a victorious war: a servant, filing.

The estate, and the instruction to extend it

The mandate that authorised the whole thing is stated so often and so flatly that it is easy to read past, and the crucial word is a possessive pronoun.

Tiglath-pileser I, three centuries before Sargon, on why he had subdued the Shubarian country: *"Assur, the lord, had put into my hand a mighty weapon which subdues the insubmissive, and commanded me to extend the frontiers of his land."* Ashurnasirpal II at the head of his annals: *"Assur, my great lord, who called me by name and made great my kingship over the kings of the four quarters (of the world), had made my name exceeding great, and had intrusted his merciless weapon unto my lordly power, and in his wrath had commanded me to conquer, to subdue and to rule."*

His land. Not the king's. The king does not enlarge his own dominion, he extends his employer's estate, holding a weapon that was put into his hand by someone else and acting on an instruction he did not draft. This is the vice-regency of the god of Assur, seen from the operational end, and it has a consequence that runs through everything that follows.

If expansion is an instruction, then a king who does not expand is not merely unambitious. He is derelict, in the specific sense of a steward who has left his employer's business undone, and he is that in the eyes of every magnate, priest and soldier who has been raised on the same theology. A campaign is therefore not a policy option to be weighed against its costs; it is the discharge of a duty, and the year in which one is not undertaken is a year requiring explanation.

Set that beside the finding of the previous module and the two lock together. A floor built on reach must be re-demonstrated every season, because an unexercised

capacity is not a credible threat, which makes the army an appetite the state has to feed rather than an asset it owns. The robe is the mechanism that converts that awkward fiscal-military necessity into a religious obligation nobody in the hierarchy can decline. It is a very economical arrangement, and it is not a cynical one, or not only. Nobody at the Assyrian court needed to be persuaded to want war. They needed a description under which not making war was impossible, and the god of the city supplied it.

The conversion

Now the move on which the whole edifice rests, and it is a legal move rather than a religious one.

Assyrian royal inscriptions almost never say that the king attacked a country because he wanted what was in it. They say the country had broken an oath. The formula recurs with the regularity of a legal citation, and it comes in two forms.

The first is oath-breaking. Sargon on Urzana of Musasir, the pretext for one of the most profitable sacks in Assyrian history: *"a worker of sin and iniquity, who broke (transgressed against) the oath by the gods and recognized no rule, a wicked mountaineer, who sinned against the oath taken by Assur, Shamash, Nabu and Marduk and revolted against me... He withheld his tribute, tax and gifts, and not once did he send his messenger to greet me."* Note the sequence: the theological charge comes first, the fiscal delinquency second, as evidence for it.

The second is self-reliance. Ashurbanipal on Taharqa of Egypt: he *"forgot the power of Assur, Ishtar and the great gods, my lords, and trusted in his own strength."* Trusting in one's own strength is, in this vocabulary, an offence. It is the specific sin of supposing that a power other than Ashur might determine an outcome, and it is charged against Elamites, Egyptians, Urartians and Babylonians alike across three centuries.

The consequence is that there are no wars in the Assyrian record. There are only punishments. Every campaign is enforcement of an existing obligation against a party in breach, and the Assyrian army is not an army but a bailiff.

Name the fiction as fiction, because it is one, and a particularly transparent one. The oaths in question were sworn by defeated kings at the point of a sword, in the presence of an army that had just demonstrated what the alternative was, and to describe their repudiation as *sin* is to convert extortion into contract law by fiat. But it is worth being careful about what kind of fiction it is. There is no evidence that Assyrian kings, scribes or soldiers regarded it as a device. The oaths were sworn before gods by both parties; the curses attached to them were believed to operate; and when the Assyrians recorded a famine among the Arabs they attributed it, in perfectly good faith, to the curse-clauses

of a treaty. A fiction believed by its authors is not a lie. It is a framework, and frameworks are harder to argue with than lies.

The enemy given lines

The most complete form of the robe is the one in which the conquered are made to say it themselves, and Assyria produced two specimens of this that are worth reading at length.

The first is Ashurbanipal on the Arabian campaign. After describing the plague, the famine, and the curse-clauses of the broken oath falling upon the Arabs one by one — and after the sentence, recorded without comment, that *"To (satisfy) their hunger they ate the flesh of their children"* — the scribe stages a conversation:

> *"The people of Arabia asked questions, the one of the other, saying: 'Why is it that such evil has befallen Arabia?' (And answered), saying: 'Because we did not keep the solemn (lit., great) oaths sworn to Assur; (because) we have sinned against the kindness (shown us by) Assurbanipal, the king beloved of Enlil's heart.'"*

The starving are given a line, and the line is the Assyrian case.

The second is Esarhaddon's letter to the god Ashur reporting the reduction of Shubria, and it goes further than any other document in the corpus. The king of Shubria, hearing that the Assyrian army is coming, is described tearing off his royal garment and wrapping his body in the *bashamu* — which Luckenbill renders *"the garment of a sinner"* — making his face evil so that he looked like a slave, counting himself among his own servants, and crying woe from the wall of his own city. And then Esarhaddon's scribe gives him a speech, in which the Shubrian king asks not for mercy on his kingdom but for its annexation:

> *"'Let Shupria, the land that sinned against thee, be attentive to thy beck (lit., look upon thy face); thy official place over them, let them bear (draw) thy yoke. Tribute and tax, yearly, without ceasing, lay upon them. I am a thief, and for the sin I have committed, fifty times will I make good what was carried off. For one fugitive, runaway Assyrian, I will make a hundredfold return.'"*

And, a few lines later: *"It was a grievous sin which I committed against the god Assur, when I did not listen to the word of the king, my lord ... The oath (lit., curse) of the great gods which I violated, the word of thy majesty which I despised, they have overtaken me."*

The enemy strips off the clothing of a king, puts on the clothing of a sinner, confesses that his crime was against Ashur rather than against Assyria, calculates his

own restitution at fifty to one, and requests a governor. It is the settlement of the previous module — *my official I set as governor over them; as Assyrians I counted them* — placed in the mouth of the man it was done to, as a petition.

Who this was for

Which forces the question that this module exists to answer. Who was meant to hear it?

Not Shubria. Shubria was destroyed, its king killed, its population deported; the document was written afterwards. And there is no evidence anywhere in the corpus that Assyrian justificatory texts circulated among conquered populations, were translated for them, or were read aloud in the provinces. The material evidence points hard the other way, in two directions at once.

The first is burial. The longest and most careful versions of the Assyrian annals — the great prisms and cylinders, the texts on which almost all modern knowledge of the empire's history depends — were written to be deposited in the foundations and walls of buildings, where no living person would see them again. Their intended readers were the gods, who see what is hidden, and future kings, who would find them when they rebuilt. The texts say so themselves, and they specify the protocol: a future ruler is to read the inscription aloud, wash it with water, anoint it with oil, and make an offering, and then the gods will hear his prayers. Ashurbanipal records having done precisely this with an inscription of his grandfather Sennacherib, and instructs whoever finds his own to do the same. This is a correspondence conducted across centuries between men who will never meet, and it is not persuasion of anybody.

The second is the way the visible texts were displayed. In the Northwest Palace at Kalhu, Ashurnasirpal II had a single text — the Standard Inscription, twenty-two lines of ancestry, titles, campaigns and building works — carved across the middle of every relief slab in the state apartments. Not beside the images: across them, over the body of the king, over the protective genies, over the sacred tree. Where the allotted space ran short, the carver simply stopped, sometimes in mid-sentence, and moved to the next slab. The same twenty-two lines, hundreds of times, in a cuneiform script that a small minority of the people in those rooms could read at all.

Nobody carves a text that way for reading. The scholars who have looked hardest at the Northwest Palace suggest the inscription had a protective or ritual function — one description has it working as though a giant cylinder seal had been rolled across the walls, sealing the room — and that seems right. The text is not there to inform. It is there to be *present*, in the way a boundary marker is present, and its presence is addressed upward.

So the robe had two audiences and neither of them was the conquered. There was a buried robe, addressed to the god and to posterity, in which the empire kept its accounts: the annals, the prisms, the letters to Ashur, the casualty formula, the confession put in the enemy's mouth. And there was a visible robe, addressed to the court, the army and the foreign envoy waiting in the outer courtyard: the reliefs, which show tribute arriving, cities falling, the king hunting lions and pouring a libation. It is worth noticing that the visible robe is the milder of the two. The flayings and the pillars of heads are in the texts, which almost nobody could read; what the visitor saw on the wall was mostly order arriving on schedule.

Re-cutting the robe in 683

The robe was not a fixed inheritance either, and there is one episode where a specific man, in a specific year, edits the creation of the world to solve a problem he had made for himself.

In 689 BC Sennacherib destroyed Babylon. He had lost a son to the Elamites there, he had tried puppet kings and native kings and his own son on the throne and none of it had held, and in the end he broke the city, diverted water over the site, and carried its gods away. That solved the political problem and created a theological one, and the theological one was serious. The creation epic recited at the New Year across Mesopotamia — including in Assyria, where copies had circulated since at least the ninth century — is the poem in which Marduk, the god of Babylon, defeats the chaos-monster Tiamat and makes the world out of her body, and is exalted above all other gods for having done it. Sennacherib had just sacked the creator's city.

His answer, in 683, was to build a festival house for the New Year outside the walls of Assur, to deposit in it dust from the Babylon he had destroyed, and to have produced a version of the creation epic in which Ashur stands where Marduk had stood: Ashur as the god who goes out to fight Tiamat, Ashur as the maker of the world, Ashur as the one exalted. An inscription for the bronze door of the festival house made the substitution explicit.

The extent of this should be stated carefully, because it is debated. Whether Sennacherib carried out a systematic religious reform or authorised a limited scribal recension is not settled; the surviving Assyrianising material is fragmentary, some of it may postdate him, and specialists including Eckart Frahm have cautioned against the grander reconstructions. But the direction of the edit is not in doubt and neither is its date, which is four years after the sack.

That is worth pausing on, because it is the most literal available demonstration of how these things are actually made. Not a doctrine unfolding, not a theology

developing: a king with a specific mess on his hands — he has destroyed the city of the god who created the universe, and his own subjects recite the poem that says so every spring — reaching for the materials to hand and editing the poem. Institutions accrete as fixes and are later mistaken for architecture. So, it turns out, do cosmologies.

What three centuries of repetition did to it

The corpus has an open question about warrants: whether a claim restated often enough wears smooth into a formula, or hardens into a constraint. Assyria is an unusually good test, because it restated its warrant more often and more publicly than any other order in this collection — at every accession, when the priest of Ashur cried out that Ashur was king; every spring at the festival; in every titulary of every inscription; and, at Kalhu, on every slab in every room.

The evidence assembled so far points to hardening rather than wearing, and it is worth setting out the two pieces plainly.

The first is fiscal, and it was established in the previous module: the exemption of Assur from tax and corvée was enforceable, and a king could be removed — or could plausibly be said to deserve removal — for breaching it. That enforceability had no legal machinery behind it. It rested entirely on the warrant being live: on enough of the Assyrian governing class actually believing that the land belonged to the god and that the king held it as steward, such that the god's own city was outside the steward's reach. A formula worn smooth cannot do that work.

The second is the letter to Ashur. Sargon II wrote to his god in the salutation form of a subordinate's despatch in 714. Esarhaddon did the same thing seventy years later, in the same form, with the same closing offering of the dead. Three centuries into the empire, at the height of Assyrian power, the king of the world was still writing upward.

Reading the robe against the framework

This collection has generally treated the robe as the story an order tells to make its arrangements feel like the order of things, and has asked, of any given robe, whom it was cut for. Assyria answers that question with unusual clarity, because the answer is physically recoverable from where the texts were put.

The robe was cut for the payers, not for the payees. The elaborate versions were buried in foundations, addressed to a god and to kings not yet born. The public versions were carved in a script most viewers could not read, across the images they were carved on, sometimes truncated mid-sentence. The confessions were put in the mouths of populations that had already been destroyed, in documents delivered in a

temple in the Assyrian heartland. At no point in three centuries does the record show an attempt to explain Assyria to the conquered. The audience was the god who owned the enterprise, the court and army that ran it, and the posterity that would judge it — which is to say, precisely the constituency whose belief funded and manned the thing, and not the constituency whose belief the floor did not require.

That much confirms an expectation. The refinement this case offers is about what a robe of that shape is *for*, and it is not what one would guess.

A robe addressed to the funders does not work by making the ruled compliant. It works by making the rulers unable to stop. Every element examined here points the same way. The mandate is an instruction to extend *his* land, which converts conquest from an option into a duty. The oath-breaking formula removes the category of legitimate opponent, so that no war can be declined on the grounds that the other party has a case. The annual liturgy re-imposes the obligation on schedule. The letters to the god establish that the king owes an account of what he has done with the god's weapon this year. Assemble those and what you have is not a justification but a ratchet.

Which closes the circuit with the previous module. A floor of reach must be re-proved every season or it stops pricing anything; that makes continuous expansion a military and fiscal necessity. A robe built as this one was makes the same expansion a religious obligation, so that the necessity is never experienced as a burden and never becomes negotiable. Together they explain something about Assyria that is otherwise mysterious — why an empire that had reached the effective limits of its logistics kept going anyway, and why no Assyrian king is recorded as having proposed that it stop. **A robe of this construction does not stabilise an order. It locks the throttle open**, and the question of what happens to a state in that condition when the returns turn negative is one this study will have to answer later.

One cost should be entered now, because it will recur. An order that has converted every enemy into an oath-breaker has abolished the concept of a legitimate opponent, and an order with no legitimate opponents cannot make a peace — it can only receive a submission. This is not an abstraction. It is why the annals had to describe the failures at Tushpa and Tyre as the receipt of tribute: there was no available vocabulary in which an Assyrian king might have concluded a settled and honourable arrangement with a rival he could not defeat, because the theology contained no such category. The robe that made Assyria unstoppable also made it unable to stop on terms. Legibility is not pardon, and it is not admiration either; but it is worth seeing that the empire's most famous quality — its refusal to leave anyone alone — was not a temperament. It was a description of the world, held sincerely, restated annually, and carved over the face of every king on every wall of the throne room.

A note on sources. All extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Sargon II's Letter to the God Ashur — the salutation (vol. II, §§ 140–141), the closing casualty formula and colophon (§§ 177–178), and the charge against Urzana of Musasir (§ 169); Esarhaddon's Letter to the God Ashur on Shubria, including *"the garment of a sinner"* and the Shubrian king's speech (§§ 593–595); Ashurbanipal on Taharqa (§ 770) and the Arabian campaign (§ 828); Tiglath-pileser I on the command to extend the frontiers of the god's land (vol. I, § 226); Ashurnasirpal II's opening titulary (§ 439). **Flags:** Luckenbill's *"the garment of a sinner"* renders *bashamu*, a term whose precise sense is not certain; his rendering of the Arabian dialogue is a translation of a staged literary set-piece and should not be read as reportage. The six-casualty formula (one charioteer, two cavalrymen, three sappers) is treated here as liturgical rather than factual, following Luckenbill's own note that the same enumeration closes Esarhaddon's letter to the god.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The reading of Assyrian imperial ideology as a centre–periphery, order–chaos structure descends from Mario Liverani's 1979 essay on the ideology of the Assyrian empire and the Copenhagen symposium in which it appeared, with later refinements by Fales, Porter, Karlsson, Portuese and others; Liverani's later work on the king and his audience underlies the question this module asks. The intended readership of foundation deposits, and the instruction that a future ruler read, wash, anoint and make offering, follows the Nimrud project's synthesis and Ben Dewar's recent work on intergenerational reciprocity in Assyrian palaces. The description of the Standard Inscription — carved across every slab, over the imagery, truncated where the space ran short, and probably serving a protective function — follows the Nimrud project, John Malcolm Russell's work on Assyrian palace inscriptions, and the Metropolitan Museum's account of the Northwest Palace reliefs. The Assyrianising recension of *Enūma Eliš*, Sennacherib's festival house at Assur in 683 and the deposit of Babylonian dust follow Alasdair Livingstone and the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project's Assyria 1995 volume, with Eckart Frahm's cautions noted. The coronation exclamation and the akītu at Assur follow the sources credited in the Landscape.

Weak links, stated plainly. The scale and coherence of Sennacherib's religious reform is genuinely contested; this module rests only on the direction and date of the *Enūma Eliš* substitution and on the construction of the festival house, and a reader who prefers the minimal reading loses none of the argument. The claim that Assyrian justificatory texts were never addressed to conquered populations is an argument from silence, strengthened by the physical evidence of burial and of unreadable display but

not proved by it; a single securely provincial, vernacular, justificatory text would qualify it substantially, and none is presently known to this study. The Ashurbanipal Arabian dialogue and the Shubrian king's speech are literary compositions by Assyrian court scribes and are used here as evidence of what the Assyrian court wished to have on record, not as evidence of anything anyone said. The inference from where texts were deposited to whom they were *intended* for is standard in the field but remains an inference.

MODULE 4

They Are to Have Wives

Module 4 · Formation — what made an Assyrian, what the empire did to the framework of everyone else, and why the instrument was not a school but a marriage

What was in the house

Start with what an Assyrian child had already absorbed before anyone had taught him anything.

His name, if he was of the ordinary sort, contained the name of a god — very often Ashur — so that every time he was called he was reminded whose he was. The year he was born in was named after a man, one of the great officers of state, and the sequence in which those men came round was fixed and known, so that to say when a thing had happened was to recite the order of precedence in the imperial hierarchy. The festivals that punctuated his year were the god's festivals; the spring one was the New Year, when the gods went out from the city to a house built for them outside the walls, and the world was made again. Under the floor of his house, in all likelihood, were his ancestors, who were fed on the appointed days by the head of the household, so that the family was not a group of living people but a line running down into the ground. And when he was old enough, he would swear an oath.

The oaths are the part of this that survives best, and they are worth looking at closely because they show a state doing something that is normally invisible.

In 672 BC Esarhaddon assembled his magnates, his governors, his officials, his vassal kings and, in principle, all the servants of the king, and had them swear a succession oath — an *adê* — binding them to his son Ashurbanipal. Copies were made and distributed, and one turned up in 2009 at Tell Tayinat in the Amuq, on the far western edge of the empire, where it had been installed in the sanctuary of a temple. The terms are ferocious and detailed: report any seditious talk, from a family member or anyone else; do not poison the king; do not work sorcery against him; do not turn his gods against him; if he is murdered, avenge him and put his son on the throne. Even performing a ritual to release oneself from the oath is a sin. The tablet is sealed with the seal of the god Ashur, set up where the swearers can see it, and they are told to guard it as they would guard their god.

And then two clauses that matter more than any of the rest. The obligations bind not only those who swore but their offspring. And the swearers are required to pass the

oath on — to instruct future generations to keep it, in a formula whose closing threat names, with some precision, what will happen to a people that does not: do not turn your land over to destruction and your people to deportation.

Read that as what it is. A state has written into a legal instrument a requirement that parents transmit a specific commitment to children who did not swear it and cannot have consented to it, and has attached to the transmission the fear of the specific fate the state itself administers. That is not propaganda and it is not a priestly trick. It is the household conscripted as the state's transmission mechanism, in writing, with a seal on it.

There is no unformed person

Which brings the module to the thing it exists to examine, and it needs stating plainly before any evidence is brought.

A conqueror does not face a choice between forming the people he has conquered and leaving them alone, because leaving them alone is not one of the available outcomes. Every child born in the conquered territory will acquire, from whoever is around him, an entire apparatus for judging the world: who his people are, who counts as a legitimate authority, whose word may be taken without checking, what is beyond argument, what the past was and what it obliges. He will acquire it before he is capable of assessing it, and by the time he can assess it his life will be built on it. There is no version of a human being who has not got one of these. To be without one is not to be neutral; it is to be feral.

So the question a conqueror actually faces is never *whether* the conquered will be formed. It is only *by whom*. And a conqueror who declines the job — who governs the adults, takes the taxes, and leaves the transmission alone as beneath his notice or too expensive to bother with — has not chosen neutrality. He has conceded the ground to whatever was already doing the work, which will go on doing it, and which will hand each new generation a framework in which he is a stranger and an intruder. This is the trap that swallowed most of the European colonial empires: they declined to form the colonised as their own, because forming them would have meant admitting them, and so the old formation simply held the field, and three generations later the state discovered it was governing a population raised from birth to regard it as illegitimate.

Assyria did not decline. That is the single most important thing to establish about this empire, and it is what makes it worth a study of its own.

The instrument, and its scale

The Assyrian answer was deportation, and the numbers need handling with care because they are the weakest evidence in this module.

The standard figure comes from Bustenay Oded's 1979 study, which collected the cases recorded in the royal inscriptions and extrapolated: roughly 4.4 million people, plus or minus 900,000, moved over about two and a half centuries. Oded identified around a hundred and fifty-seven substantiated cases with a known destination. Karen Radner's estimate is that some eighty-five per cent of those moved ended up in the Assyrian heartland. Every one of those numbers is an extrapolation from a boastful and incomplete record, the margin Oded himself attaches is enormous, and the true figure could be well under half of it. What is not in doubt is that the practice was continuous, systematic, administered by named officials, and applied to entire populations rather than to elites alone.

What it was not is a death march, and the evidence for that is uncomfortable but has to be entered honestly. Two letters from a provincial official to Tiglath-pileser III survive. In the first, the official acknowledges an order to prepare a group of Aramaeans for their journey and lists what he will issue them: food supplies, clothes, a waterskin, a pair of shoes and oil. He adds that he has not got his donkeys yet, and will send the convoy when they arrive. Assyrian palace art, which elsewhere shows flaying and impalement without flinching, mostly depicts deportees as families walking or riding in groups with their possessions, unbound — and an art tradition that does not conceal atrocity is unlikely to be concealing this one. And in the Hebrew account of the siege of Jerusalem in 701, the Assyrian envoy at the wall offers deportation as an *inducement*: come out to me, and each of you will eat of his own vine and his own fig tree, until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain and wine and bread and vineyards and olives and honey, that you may live and not die.

Hold both things at once. It was a planned, provisioned, administratively competent operation which frequently improved the material circumstances of the people it moved. It was also the permanent and involuntary destruction of every world it touched, and no amount of shoes and oil makes that anything else.

The mechanism, in one letter

Now the second of the two letters, which is the centre of this module and possibly of the whole study.

The same official writes again about the same Aramaeans. The king has sent an instruction, and the official quotes it: *"They are to have wives!"* He reports that suitable

local women have been found in numbers, but that their fathers are refusing to give them in marriage without payment of the bride price. And so he asks the crown to pay it, so that the Aramaeans can be married.

Sit with what is in that document. The king of Assyria is issuing personal instructions that a group of deportees are to be married to local women. His official is treating this as a supply problem with a budget line. And the obstacle is not the deportees' unwillingness, or the women's — it is the fathers holding out for the bride price, which the state is being asked to cover out of the treasury.

This is the formation apparatus, and it is not a school.

Consider what a marriage of that kind produces. A deported Aramaean man and a local woman set up a household. The two of them share no ancestors, no home town, no festivals in common, no dead under the same floor, quite possibly no first language. Whatever framework each of them was raised in, neither can hand it on intact, because handing it on is not a matter of instruction — it is a matter of a child growing up surrounded by people who all, without ever discussing it, take the same things for granted. In that house nobody takes the same things for granted. What the child of that marriage will absorb instead is whatever the street outside supplies: the neighbourhood's festivals, the district's language, the state's calendar, the governor's authority, the god of the place he lives in.

Nobody has to teach him anything. The state does not need missionaries, does not need schools, does not need to require anyone to worship Ashur — and, tellingly, there is no evidence that it ever did require that of a conquered population. It needs only to arrange the households.

Radner states the objective of the resettlement policy without hedging, and her formulation is the one to test: the state actively encouraged the mixing of new neighbours, and the ultimate goal was a homogeneous population with a shared culture and a common identity — that of Assyrians. The letters show the machinery by which that was pursued, and it operated one level below anything that could be called education. It operated on who married whom.

Samaria, from both sides

The one case where both the conqueror's account and the victims' account survive is the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, and running them beside each other shows the whole method.

The Assyrian version, from Sargon II's Nimrud Prism as Luckenbill has it, is fragmentary but the operative clauses are legible: *"[27,290 people, who lived therein] I carried away; 50 chariots for my royal equipment, I selected from [among them] ... [The*

city I rebuilt], I made it greater than it was before; people of the lands [my hand had conquered, I settled therein. My official I placed over them as governor]. Tribute, tax, I imposed upon them as upon the Assyrians ... I mixed together." From a separate passage of the same reign, on a campaign against the desert Arabs — the tribes of Tamud, Ibadidi, Marsimanu and Haiapa — comes the other half of the operation: *"the remnant of them I deported and settled them in Samaria."*

The Hebrew version, in 2 Kings 17, supplies the destinations and the incoming names. The Israelites were carried away *"and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes"* — three widely separated regions, one on the Khabur in northern Syria, one in the Zagros foothills. And into the emptied province came, according to the same chapter, men *"from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim."*

Count what that makes. The population of a kingdom is removed and distributed across at least three regions a thousand kilometres apart. Into its place go Babylonians, Cuthaeans, people of Ava, Hamathites, Sepharvites, and Arab tribesmen from the Syrian desert — six unrelated populations, no two of them sharing a god or a language, none of them a majority, none of them with an institution on the ground, all of them under an Assyrian governor and all of them assessed for tax *as upon the Assyrians*.

There is an administrative detail here that deserves its own sentence. The Israelites were sent, among other places, to the cities of the Medes. Assyria did not conquer those cities until 716, six years after Samaria fell. Whoever planned the destination of that deportation was working from a map of territory the empire did not yet hold.

And then the Hebrew historian, who is hostile and partisan and writing to explain a rival community's origins, records what came of the mixture — first the famous episode in which the newcomers, not knowing the local god, are attacked by lions, and the king of Assyria sends back one of the deported priests *"and let him teach them the manner of the God of the land"*; and then, at the end of the chapter, the verdict:

> *"So these nations feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day."*

That is a description of a formation that took. Not the Israelite one and not the Assyrian one: a hybrid, produced by mixture, transmitted intact across at least three generations, and still running when the passage was written. From the historian's point of view it is a scandal. From the point of view of the policy it is a success, and the sentence *both their children, and their children's children* is the measurement.

The community that descended from the population of that province has its own account of its origins, which is not this one, and the question of who the Samaritans are is live religious and ethnic ground with people alive today who have a stake in it. This study names whose account is whose and does not adjudicate between them.

The control inside the conquest

The most useful piece of evidence about the mechanism comes from inside the single Assyrian operation, because Sargon did two different things to the same people in the same year and the outcomes diverged.

The bulk of the population was parcelled out and mixed, as described. But fifty chariots — meaning their crews, professional soldiers — were selected out and taken into the royal corps as a unit. Twelve years later, in the muster records drawn up in 709, that unit is still on the Assyrian books under its own name, the *Sāmerināia*, the Samarians, and something over eighty per cent of the officers named in it still bear West Semitic names.

Same conqueror. Same year. Same people. One group is broken into fragments and settled among strangers; the other is kept together, given a name, and left under its own officers. After twelve years the first is not identifiable in the record at all and the second is still called the Samarians.

The variable is not Assyrian cruelty in one case and Assyrian tolerance in the other. Both groups were the property of the same state and served its purposes. **The variable is whether the group was left with a community of transmission.** Keep enough people together who share a framework and the framework survives, without anyone taking any trouble over it. Break them into parcels too small to reproduce it and it stops, without anyone taking any trouble over that either.

Three empires, one people

Which sets up the comparison this study was built to run: one people, one region, three conquering hierarchies inside a hundred and fifty years, three different answers to the identical problem, and three outcomes visible in the record.

Assyria, 722. Deport the population, split it across three distant regions, import strangers into the vacated province, mix the incomers, tax everyone as Assyrians, put a governor over them. The result is measurable, and the measurement is bleak. Ran Zadok's survey of the entire Neo-Assyrian documentary record between 732 and 602 identifies seventy-two individuals who can be recognised as of Israelite or Judaean origin — recognised, in the main, because they still bore names containing the element

Yahu. Seventy-two people, across seventy years of archives, out of tens of thousands deported. They are not persecuted out of existence; there is no Assyrian campaign against the god of Israel, no martyrdoms, no edicts. They simply stop being distinguishable, because after two generations of mixed households in scattered settlements there is nobody left transmitting the thing that made them distinguishable. The ten northern tribes were not lost. They were dissolved, by a method, and the method left records.

Babylon, 597 and 586. Deport the elite — and settle them together. The archives from southern Mesopotamia published as the Al-Yahudu texts show a settlement whose name is *āl Yahūdu*, the town of Judah, forming part of an administrative unit of Judaean state dependants used for taxing and conscription, with related settlements nearby. The people in it are not slaves; they hold land, pay taxes, lease property, appear as witnesses. And they keep their names: Yahwistic personal names persist across the generations documented, and by some readings the proportion of them *rises* as the exile goes on. There is a bounded community, with a name of its own, in one place, holding property together, in which the framework can be transmitted the ordinary way — and what comes out of it, within a century, is a scripture and a people who are still here.

Persia, 539. Send them home, pay for the temple, and rule through the restored formation. The result is a province that gives Persia very little trouble and a formation that outlives all three empires.

Lay the arithmetic out and leave the sum alone. But the confounds have to be entered, because the comparison is not clean. The Babylonian deportation is nearer in time, far better documented, and deliberately concentrated on a scribal and priestly class whose whole business was transmission. The northern deportation may have removed a smaller proportion of the population than the biblical account implies; survey archaeology suggests substantial continuity of settlement in the province of Samerina, which would mean the dissolution owed as much to the incomers and the mixing as to the removals. And the Judahite survival is over-documented relative to everything else in this study precisely because it survived, which is the selection effect this entire subject has to be read against. The comparison is suggestive. It is not an experiment.

What Assyria actually got

Now the part that the empire did not order, and it is a large one.

The mixing worked. Israelites, Hamathites, Chaldeans, Elamites, Anatolians, Medes and a dozen others were dissolved into the imperial population with real thoroughness, and the archives from places like Guzana — where a large share of the Samarian

deportees went — show exactly the expected picture: Assyrian, Aramaic and Anatolian names in the same documents, in the same families, across generations.

But look at what they converged *on*. Not Akkadian. The language that spread through the empire on the back of the empire's own deportation policy was Aramaic — the speech of the largest single displaced bloc, written in an alphabet a man could learn in a season rather than a syllabary requiring years in a scribal household. By the eighth century Aramaic was the language of international diplomacy; the Hebrew account of the 701 siege has Hezekiah's officials asking the Assyrian envoy to speak Aramaic because they understand it, and asking him not to speak Judahite so the men on the wall will not. By the seventh century the Assyrian palace employed alphabetic scribes alongside cuneiform ones, and a wall painting at Til Barsip shows the two kinds standing side by side, one writing on clay and one on parchment. Akkadian ceased to be a spoken language somewhere in the following century and a half.

So the state got the dissolution it wanted and did not get the substance. It could parcel the populations; it could not choose what they converged upon. What emerged in the Assyrian heartland was a mixed, Aramaic-speaking imperial population — and, crucially, one that did not revert. When the empire was destroyed between 614 and 609, the people in those provinces did not disperse back to ancestral identities, because for most of them there was no longer an ancestral identity to disperse back to. You cannot return to something your grandparents stopped transmitting. (Whether and how the Assyrian name and identity continued after 609 is a live question with a living people's stake in it, and this study notes that the question exists and goes no further.)

Reading formation against the framework

The collection has carried, as a proposition awaiting a test, the claim that a conqueror meeting an intact rival formation has four options and only four: destroy both the formation and the institution that carries it, which is genocidal and beyond most means; replace both, which is expensive and obliges him to admit the formed; leave both, which leaves a rival standing but also leaves a counterparty with an address; or remove the institution and leave the formation, which is cheapest, looks like success for two generations, and is the most dangerous, because it converts an organised rival into an unorganised and inextinguishable one.

Assyria's answer is not on that list, and the reason it is not on the list is that **the list assumes formation is something a conqueror does to a person.** All four options describe a transaction between the state and the formed individual — kill him, re-teach him, tolerate him, or disarm him. Assyria worked one level down, and the finding this module contributes is the one that makes the fifth option intelligible:

Formation is not transmitted by teaching. It is transmitted by a community that shares it — and a conqueror who removes the community does not need to touch the formation at all.

A child does not acquire his framework by being instructed in it. He acquires it by growing up among people who agree, without ever having to say so, on what the year is called and who the ancestors were and which authority is real and what is beyond argument. That agreement is the mechanism. Break the agreement — by taking the population off the ground its framework was attached to, splitting it into parcels too small to sustain a shared world, dropping strangers into the gaps, and paying the bride price so that the households themselves are mixed — and the transmission stops. No one has to be re-educated. No institution has to be replaced. The next generation is formed exactly as thoroughly as it would otherwise have been, because there is no unformed person; it is simply formed by the surroundings the state has arranged rather than by the inheritance the state has dispersed.

This is why it is a genuine fifth option rather than a variant of the others, and why it was attractive. It is cheaper than replacement, because transport and rations cost less than a school system or a priesthood. It is far cheaper than a permanent garrison. It does not oblige the conqueror to admit anybody to anything, because it does not confer a formation — it confers only a tax liability, which is what *counted as Assyrians* meant in the settlement. And it does not leave the fourth option's residue, because there is no unorganised rival with a shared framework waiting to be re-organised; the framework is gone, not merely disarmed.

Two consequences, and the second is the one that matters most.

The first explains something that has puzzled readers of this empire. Assyria was saturated in its own theology at home and almost entirely indifferent to religion abroad: no missionaries, no forced conversions, no suppression of local gods as such. That looks like inconsistency until it is set beside the previous module's finding that the robe was cut for the funders rather than the ruled. The conquered were never expected to believe anything in particular. Their formation was handled by demography, not by doctrine, and doctrine would have been a waste of money.

The second is where this case corrects the framework rather than confirming it. **The fifth option is not a cheaper version of the other four. It has a different failure mode.** The other four fail by producing a rival — a live one, a resentful one, or an inextinguishable one. This one fails by producing *something the conqueror did not specify*. Dissolution is a subtractive operation and it works; but what fills the space afterwards is decided by whatever is easiest for a mixed population to converge on, and that is not in the state's gift. Assyria dissolved a dozen peoples with genuine success and

got back an Aramaic-speaking population which had no ancestral loyalties to revert to and no particular loyalty to Assyria either — which is why nothing rose in the provinces to defend the empire when it fell, and equally why nothing rose from the graves of the old kingdoms to celebrate. There was nobody left in either condition.

Which yields the refinement to carry forward. This collection has generally held that the floor does not require the conquered to believe anything. The Assyrian case sharpens that into something more exact: **the state's interest was never in the content of what the conquered believed, but in whether enough of them believed the same thing.** A shared framework is the substrate on which coordinated resistance runs — not because it supplies grievance, which is always available, but because it supplies the mutual expectation without which no rising can be organised. Assyria attacked the substrate and left the content alone, and that is the most efficient thing anybody in this collection has yet been found doing to a conquered people. It is also, measured over three centuries, among the most destructive, and the two facts are the same fact.

A note on sources. Extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Sargon II's Nimrud Prism on Samaria, including the 27,290, the fifty chariots, the settlement of conquered peoples, the imposition of tribute *"as upon the Assyrians"* and the phrase *"I mixed together"* (vol. II, § 4, a broken text whose restorations are Luckenbill's and are marked as such in his brackets); the Display Inscription version (§ 55); and the settlement of the defeated desert Arabs in Samaria (§ 17). Scriptural quotation is from the Authorised Version, which is public domain: 2 Kings 17:6, 24, 26–27 and 41, and 2 Kings 18:31–32 for the envoy's offer at Jerusalem. **Flag:** the Nimrud Prism passage is heavily restored, and the phrase rendered *"I mixed together"* sits in a damaged context; readers who want to press the argument should consult the modern edition rather than rest on Luckenbill's brackets.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The two letters from the provincial official to Tiglath-pileser III (NL 25 and NL 26, edited as SAA 19 17 and 18) are paraphrased from Karen Radner's account of the resettlement policy, with the royal order *"They are to have wives!"* quoted as a short phrase; her statement of the policy's objective — the mixing of neighbours to produce a shared identity — is likewise hers. The deportation figures are Bustenay Oded's, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden, 1979), with the heartland proportion from Radner. Esarhaddon's succession oath follows Parpola and Watanabe's edition (SAA 2) and Jacob Lauinger's publication of the Tell Tayinat manuscript, including the finding that it had been installed in a temple sanctuary; the

instruction to transmit the oath to later generations and the terms binding offspring are paraphrased from the Nimrud project's synthesis. The survival of the *Sāmerināia* unit in the muster records of 709 follows Dezső and Dalley, as in Module 1. The Al-Yahudu material follows Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia* (2014), and the reading of Yahwistic names as an identity marker there; the contrast between Assyrian dispersal and Babylonian concentration is drawn in that literature and is not this study's invention. The count of seventy-two identifiable Israelite and Judaean individuals in the Neo-Assyrian record is Ran Zadok's. The Aramaic language shift follows Garelli, Kaufman, and the recent literature on the death of Akkadian; the Til Barsip wall painting of paired cuneiform and alphabetic scribes is standard. The Guzana onomastic picture follows the Tell Halaf publications and Fales on West Semitic names in the Assyrian empire.

Weak links, stated plainly, and this module has more than most. Oded's 4.4 million ± 900,000 is an extrapolation from a boastful, incomplete and self-selecting record, and the real figure may be very much lower; nothing in the argument depends on the total, only on the practice being systematic. Radner's characterisation of deportation as generally humane rests on the letters, the art, and an argument from what Assyrian art does not conceal elsewhere — it is persuasive but it is an inference, and the letters describe two convoys, not a policy average. The reading of the marriage letter as an instrument of formation rather than simply of demographic replacement or male-surplus management is this study's own, and a reader who prefers the simpler explanation should note that the two are not exclusive and that the formative effect follows either way. The three-empire comparison is confounded as set out in the text: different dates, different documentary densities, a deliberately different selection of deportees, and a severe survivorship bias in favour of the case that survived. Zadok's seventy-two rests on identifying people by theophoric names, a method whose limits Oded himself set out at length — deportees commonly adopted local naming patterns, so name-loss and identity-loss are not the same measurement, and the figure should be read as an upper bound on visibility rather than a count of survivors. The claim that Assyria never imposed religious observance on conquered populations is an argument from silence. And the Samaritan origin question is contested religious and ethnic ground on which this study takes no position beyond identifying whose account is whose.

MODULE 5

Carry the Headpad and Mold Bricks

Module 5 · The Cost Column — why the ordinary man complied, run separately for the free Assyrian farmer, the deportee, the provincial subject, the vassal's subject, the slave and the tribesman; and why revolt tracked exit rather than grievance

Two sentences from one building programme

Sennacherib, describing the rebuilding of Nineveh, records what he did for the people of his capital:

> *"That (they might) plant orchards, I subdivided some land in the plain above the city, into plots of 3 PI each, for the citizens of Nineveh, and gave it to them. To increase the vegetation, from the border of the town of Kisiri to the plain about Nineveh, through mountain and lowland, with iron pickaxes I cut and directed a canal ... the waters of the Husur (Khosr), which from of old sought too low a level, I made to flow through those orchards in irrigation ditches."*

And, in the same corpus, describing how the work was done:

> *"The people of Chaldea, the Arameans, the Manneans, (the people) of the lands of Kue and Hilakku, who had not submitted to my yoke, I deported (from their lands), made them carry the headpad and mold bricks."*

One king, one programme of works, two sentences. In the first, a free man of Nineveh receives a plot of land and the water to irrigate it, at no cost to himself. In the second, a Chaldean and a Cilician carry the basket that digs the ditch which brings the water. Both entries are real, both were written down by the same scribes, and neither cancels the other.

That is the shape of the Assyrian arrangement at ground level, and it explains why this module cannot be written as a single ledger. There was no such person as the Assyrian common man. There was a free Assyrian farmer, a deportee, a subject of an annexed province, a subject of a vassal king, a debt-bonded dependant, a household slave and a tribesman on the margin, and each of them faced a different sum. Run them separately, and then look at which of them actually revolted, because the answer is not the one grievance would predict.

The free Assyrian farmer

Take him first because his ledger is the easiest to reconstruct and the least interesting, which is itself the finding.

He owed a great deal. A share of his grain harvest as the corn tax and of his straw as the straw tax; deliveries in kind on a provincial quota, horses above all; and the *ilku*, the obligation of labour and military service that attached to his land rather than to his person, so that holding the field and owing the work were the same fact. When the army mustered he provisioned it, when the road stations needed feeding he fed them, and when a king decided to build a capital he went and built it.

He got a great deal too, and the temptation to discount it should be resisted. He held his land under a tenure that was real, heritable, and defensible in a court — and there were courts, with witnesses, written contracts, sealed tablets, recorded judgements and a body of procedure substantial enough that a modern edition of Neo-Assyrian court documents runs to sixty-two texts. He could hire labour and be hired; a wage economy existed. In the capitals he might receive, as Sennacherib's inscription says without embarrassment, a plot of ground and the water to work it.

And he got one thing larger than all of these, which the arithmetic of the Landscape makes visible. From roughly 911 until roughly 630 — nearly three hundred years — no foreign army entered the Assyrian heartland. For a farmer on the two-hundred-millimetre isohyet whose great-grandfathers' generation had watched Aramean tribes take the fortified cities, plunder the districts of Nineveh, and reduce the country to a famine in which people ate one another, that is not an abstraction. It is the difference between a bad year and annihilation, and it was delivered continuously for ten generations. Whatever else the Assyrian state was, it was the thing that had stopped that happening, and it said so at every opportunity.

Set the two columns beside each other and the free Assyrian farmer's sum comes out for compliance without much difficulty. Which is why his refusal is almost invisible in the record: there is nothing in the archives resembling a peasant revolt in the Assyrian heartland across three centuries.

The Harran census, and what a peasant was

But "free farmer" describes only part of the rural population, and the best window onto the rest is a group of tablets found at Nineveh which describe the countryside around Harran on the Balikh. They are sometimes called the Assyrian Domesday Book, and they are rosters of land and people belonging to a set of middling and senior officials.

They enumerate households — averaging about five persons, overwhelmingly bearing West Semitic names — village by village, with their fields, vineyards, buildings and livestock. The people in them fall into categories: bow-men, who owed armed service alongside their farming; farmers tied to particular holdings; dependants assigned to temples, including the house of the moon god at Harran. And the reason the rosters were compiled appears to have been fiscal: they were drawn up so that the estate-holders could establish exemption.

Sit with that. The peasants of the Harran plain were counted, named, and their households sized, in order that the men who held them might stop paying tax on them.

The legal frame around this is worth stating precisely, because it is easy to overstate in either direction. Assyrian conveyance documents — the standard instrument for transferring property — record transfers of "real estate and persons" in a single form: fields, houses, building plots, gardens, vineyards, and occasionally entire villages, with the people on them. This is not chattel slavery, and the sources keep the categories distinct; a dependent farmer had a household, a name, a legal existence and, as the census shows, sons who might be enrolled as bow-men. But it does mean that his relation to the land was not one he could dissolve by walking off it, because he was among the things the land conveyed.

The deportee, whose ledger is the strangest in this collection

The deportee's account has already been sketched: he arrived with provisions issued by the state, was given land and a house and the tools to work them, was taxed like anyone else, and — as the letters in the previous module show — might have his marriage arranged and his bride price paid out of the treasury.

In material terms the transfer was often an upgrade. Eighty-five per cent of those moved went into the Assyrian heartland, which is to say into better-watered, better-connected, better-policed country than most of them had left. The road out was provisioned. On arrival there was land.

Against that stands everything he had: the town, the graves, the neighbours, the language his mother used, the festivals that told him what month it was, and any prospect whatever of returning to them.

And the entry that matters most for this module is the one that is not usually listed. **The deportee's exit value was zero.** He could not go home, because home had strangers living in it and his own kin were three regions away. He could not go anywhere else, because he had no relatives to receive him in any direction and no community that would recognise him. And, within two generations, he had no shared

framework with anyone but his immediate neighbours, because the previous module's mechanism had seen to that.

Which produces a conclusion the Assyrians appear to have reached by trial and error and never wrote down. A population with a genuinely improved material position, no possibility of exit, and no shared framework on which to organise is the safest large population a state can keep near its own capital. The deportees were both the most useful people in the empire and the least dangerous, and those were the same fact. That is why they were put where they were.

The provincial subject

A man in an annexed province — Samerina, Musasir, Gurgum, Hamath — sat somewhere between the two.

His benefits were structural rather than personal. The roads reached him; so did the market that came with them, and the standing peace that ended the raiding and counter-raiding his grandfather's kingdom had conducted against the kingdom eleven miles away. His costs were the same bundle the Assyrian farmer bore, and the sources say so in exactly those words. Sargon on the annexation of Musasir: *"The people of the province of Musasir I reckoned with the people of Assyria; tax and taskwork I imposed upon them as upon Assyrians."* The legal fiction identified two modules ago — that incorporation and liability are one act — resolves at ground level into a tax bill and a labour draft.

The labour draft deserves a number. Within a hundred and fifty years the empire built three capitals more or less from nothing: Kalhu under Ashurnasirpal II, Dur-Sharrukin under Sargon II, and Nineveh under Sennacherib. Each required quarrying, hauling, brick-moulding and canal-cutting on a scale that consumed tens of thousands of workers for years at a time, drawn from the provinces and from the deportee population, and each was announced in the same formula: I mustered them, and I made them carry the basket.

And Dur-Sharrukin, finished in 706, was abandoned in 705 when Sargon died on campaign and his son moved to Nineveh. An entire capital city's worth of forced labour purchased nothing at all — not for the crown, not for the men who built it, not for anyone.

The vassal's subject

The worst position in the empire is also the least documented, which is why it is easy to miss.

A peasant in a kingdom that had submitted but not been annexed paid twice. He paid his own king's taxes, which continued exactly as before, and he paid — through his own king, who had to find the money somewhere — the annual tribute Assyria assessed. He received in exchange no Assyrian roads, no Assyrian court, and no Assyrian garrison, because the whole attraction of the vassal arrangement from Nineveh's side was that it required no Assyrian presence.

And he carried a risk he had no part in creating. If his king judged the moment badly and rebelled, the punishment fell on the kingdom: the city stormed, the population deported, the notables killed. Nothing in the Assyrian record suggests that the subjects of a rebellious vassal were ever distinguished from the vassal.

This yields a genuinely uncomfortable conclusion, and it should be stated rather than softened. For a peasant in a small tributary kingdom, annexation could be an improvement. It removed a layer of extraction, replaced an unaccountable local dynast with an official who answered upward to a king who read his correspondence, and connected the district to a road system and a market. It is not necessary to believe the Assyrians were benevolent to see that the arithmetic sometimes worked out that way, and it may be part of why the record of provincial resistance is so much thinner than the record of vassal rebellion.

The slave, and the road into slavery

Slavery existed and is documented in the sale records — a steady trickle of contracts from Nineveh, from Kalhu, from provincial towns like Marqasi in the former kingdom of Gurgum, recording the sale of individuals and small groups. It was household and craft slavery rather than the demographic base of the economy, and the Assyrian economy did not run on it the way later Mediterranean economies would.

The road in was mostly debt. A cultivator on the zone of uncertainty who lost a harvest borrowed grain or silver, and the standard security arrangement in the region was the antichretic pledge: rather than paying interest, the debtor handed over a person — a slave if he had one, otherwise a family member — to work for the creditor for the duration. The pledge served both as the interest and as the security. Where the rate is recoverable it commonly runs at a quarter or a third on grain, which is to say that a bad year could be survived and two consecutive bad years frequently could not.

The point for this module is a structural one. The debt mechanism converted the ordinary hazard of the climate — the forty to sixty per cent interannual variability described in the Landscape — into a machine that transferred people from the free peasantry into dependence, one failed harvest at a time, without any decision by the state at all.

Exit

Now the variable that turns out to explain more than any other, and the evidence for it is unusually good because the Assyrians worried about it in writing.

People ran. The state archives contain a substantial file on fugitives: soldiers who deserted, dependants who absconded, officials who fled after a failed faction fight, whole groups who crossed a frontier. Ashur-nirari V was concerned with blocking desertions to Urartu. When Esarhaddon reduced Shubria, the fugitive question was central enough that his letter to the god puts an offer in the mouth of the Shubrian king — a hundredfold return for every runaway Assyrian.

And then look at what the great powers did about it. In the same letter Esarhaddon records that, because of his treaty with Rusa II of Urartu, he handled the captured Urartian runaways differently from his own: he inquired, questioned, investigated, and returned every one of them, holding back not a single Urartian fugitive, so that the Urartian king could punish them himself.

That is a mutual extradition regime between two hostile empires, honoured in writing, in the middle of a war. **The states that fought each other for a century agreed on one thing: that a man who ran should be sent back.** Which means that for most subjects of the Assyrian empire, running to the next kingdom did not work. The exit was closed not by Assyrian power but by the agreement of Assyria's enemies.

What did work was terrain the ramp could not be built in.

The southern Babylonian marshes are the clearest case. Fugitives went into the reeds with their followings and came out when the Assyrian army had gone home; Assyrian reliefs show troops working through the marshes in reed boats, which is the visual record of a problem that was never solved. Merodach-baladan of Bit-Yakin, twice king of Babylon and for four decades the most persistent enemy Assyria had in the south, was hunted through those marshes for five days and not caught, ruled from them, retreated into them repeatedly, and finally died beyond the empire's reach on the Elamite coast. His sons and grandsons went on doing it.

The Arab tribes of the Syrian desert did the same thing with sand. The mountain peoples of the Zagros and the Taurus did it with altitude. And in every case the Assyrians could enter, devastate, and receive a submission — and could not stay, and could not prevent the population going back to where it had been.

What the pattern actually shows

Now put the six ledgers side by side and ask which populations revolted.

Not the deportees. In three centuries of a policy that moved something in the order of millions of people, there is no record of a deportee rising. Not the Assyrian free farmers, who had the loaded benefit column. Not, in the main, the settled agricultural populations of the annexed provinces of the north and west, whose resistance to annexation is far thinner in the record than the biblical framing leads one to expect. Not the debt-bonded and not the household slaves.

The revolts came, over and over, for three hundred years, from the Chaldean tribes of the marshes, the Aramean tribes of the riverine swamps, the desert Arabs, and the mountain peoples of the northern and eastern frontier. The names in the rebellion lists are Bit-Yakin, Bit-Amukani, Bit-Dakkuri, the Puqudu and the Gambulu, the tribes of Tamud and Ibadidi, Shubria, Zamua, the Mannean country.

These were not, on any reading, the most exploited people in the empire. A Chaldean sheikh's tribesman was not carrying the headpad at Dur-Sharrukin; a deportee resettled at Guzana was. The populations that suffered most under the Assyrian arrangement are absent from the record of resistance, and the populations that resisted continuously were, in the main, those the arrangement touched least.

The variable that separates them is not grievance and it is not belief. **It is whether they could leave.**

Reading the cost column against the framework

The collection holds that the floor of force, translated into the language of decision, simply *is* the entry in every subject's cost column — the credible enforcer that prices defection too high — and that an order therefore holds not because all believe in it but because, for each, the sum comes out against revolt. Assyria confirms that with unusual clarity, because it is a case where the belief half was deliberately never installed in the conquered at all. There were no missionaries, no imposed cult, no attempt to make a Cilician or a Hamathite believe in the justice of the arrangement. The whole weight sat on the two remaining entries: what a man got, and what refusal would cost him.

Two refinements follow, and the first is the one this module contributes.

The floor's reach determines whose ledger it can enter, and exit is the name for the gap between the floor's radius and the map. Module 1 established that Assyria's monopoly was on arrival rather than on force, and that it failed precisely where an assault ramp could not be built — at Tushpa on its crag, at Tyre on its island. This module finds that the map of continuous rebellion is the same map. The marshes, the desert and the mountains that defeated the army are the marshes, the desert and the mountains from which the revolts came, and for the same reason: in that terrain the state could not credibly promise to collect. **The failures of the floor and the failures**

of compliance are one list, not two. Assyria's chronic revolt problem was never a legitimacy problem or a grievance problem. It was a geography problem, and it lasted exactly as long as the geography did.

This sharpens the collection's forecasting claim in a useful way. The instruction has been to read the shared cost column — the credibility of the enforcer — because it sits in every ledger at once. Assyria shows that it does not, quite. It sits in every ledger the enforcer can reach, and a subject population's distance from that reach is a second reading a forecaster should take, because a people with a viable exit is a people whose cost column is permanently short an entry, no matter how strong the state is elsewhere. Grievance predicts almost nothing; the state of the floor predicts a great deal; **the state of the floor divided by the availability of exit predicts more.**

The second refinement concerns who pays for the benefit column, and it compounds with what came before.

The free Assyrian's orchard plot was watered by a canal dug by Chaldeans and Cilicians carrying the headpad, and this was not a hidden arrangement — Sennacherib recorded both halves in the same inscription, evidently seeing no tension. **The benefit column of one stratum was funded out of the cost column of another, and the arrangement was stable precisely because they were different people, geographically separated and, after the previous module's work, unable to recognise a common position.** But an arrangement of that kind has a supply requirement written into it: it holds only while new populations keep arriving to carry the baskets. The moment the conquests stop, the transfers stop, and the free Assyrian's benefit column begins to thin while his tax and *ilku* remain exactly where they were.

Which closes a circuit that has now been drawn three times from three directions. The floor of reach must be re-demonstrated every season or it stops pricing anything. The robe converts that necessity into a religious obligation that no one in the hierarchy can decline. And the domestic settlement is funded by the same expansion, so that stopping would impose a visible cost on precisely the free Assyrian population whose belief and whose sons the whole apparatus depends on. The military, the theological and the fiscal reasons Assyria could not stop expanding are the same reason described three ways.

Legibility is not pardon. The men moulding bricks at Dur-Sharrukin had been marched there from Chaldea and Cilicia to build a city that was inhabited for one year, and nothing in the arithmetic above makes that anything other than what it was. But the arithmetic is worth having, because it explains something the atrocity by itself cannot: why, for three centuries, the people with the most to resent were the quietest,

and why the empire's peace was broken over and over by people who had somewhere else to go.

A note on sources. Extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Sennacherib on the orchard plots and the Kisiri canal for the citizens of Nineveh (vol. II, §§ 368–369), and on the Chaldeans, Arameans, Manneans, Cilicians and men of Que made to *"carry the headpad and mold bricks"* (§ 364); Sargon II on Musasir, *"tax and taskwork I imposed upon them as upon Assyrians"* (§ 175), and on making the workforce carry the basket and mould bricks at Dur-Sharrukin (§ 83). **Flag:** Luckenbill's *"headpad"* and *"basket"* render terms for the carrying-frame used in mudbrick construction; the phrase is formulaic across several reigns and its precise force is a matter of translation convention.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The fiscal obligations of the Assyrian countryside — corn and straw taxes, quota deliveries, and the *ilku* as a land-attached obligation — follow J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome, 1974), as in Module 2. The Harran census texts are edited in Fales and Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records* II (SAA 11, nos. 201–220); the household sizes derive from Martha Roth's analysis, the West Semitic character of the onomasticon from Fales, and the suggestion that the rosters were compiled for purposes of tax exemption is the standard reading in that literature. The categories of rural dependency (bow-men, tied farmers, temple dependants) and the reading of Assyrian conveyance documents as transferring "real estate and persons" in one instrument follow the Assyrian Empire Builders synthesis and Gershon Galil's study of lower-stratum families. Neo-Assyrian judicial procedure follows Remko Jas's edition; the existence of a wage economy follows Karen Radner's work on hired labour. The fugitive material — desertions to Urartu under Ashur-nirari V, Esarhaddon's return of Urartian runaways under his treaty with Rusa II, and the Shubrian offer of hundredfold restitution — follows the study of fugitives published in *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* XXI (2015), read alongside Esarhaddon's letter to the god as in Module 3. Deportation figures and the eighty-five per cent heartland proportion are Oded's and Radner's, as in Module 4. The antichretic pledge and the debt mechanism are described from the general first-millennium Mesopotamian literature.

Weak links, stated plainly. The claim that no foreign army entered the Assyrian heartland between roughly 911 and 630 is a summary of the campaign record and could be qualified by frontier raids the annals would not have recorded; nothing in the argument requires it to be absolute. The interest rates cited are drawn largely from Babylonian rather than Assyrian documentation, since the Neo-Assyrian economic

record is far thinner than the Neo-Babylonian one, and the transfer should be treated as an approximation. The claim that the settled provincial populations resisted less than the tribal ones is an argument from a silence that may be an artefact of what the annals bothered to record — a peasant refusal in Samerina would not necessarily have been written down anywhere, whereas a Chaldean revolt in Babylonia certainly would. The suggestion that annexation could lower the total burden on a vassal's subject is a reconstruction from structure rather than from any document stating it. And the central claim of this module — that revolt tracked exit rather than grievance — rests on a correlation between the geography of rebellion and the geography of inaccessible terrain, which is strong and consistent across three centuries but which cannot exclude the alternative explanation that tribal social organisation, rather than terrain, was what made those populations capable of coordinated resistance. The two explanations are not exclusive, and the honest position is that this study cannot separate them.

MODULE 6

A Price in Silver Like That in Copper

Module 6 · Extraction — what the empire took, by which of four quite different mechanisms, where it went, and why an order that consumes stocks while paying for flows cannot read its own accounts

Breaking the seals

In 714 BC, on his way home from the Zagros, Sargon II turned aside to the mountain town of Musasir, where a temple of the god Haldi had been receiving offerings for something over a thousand years. The pretext was that its king, Urzana, had broken his oath. What follows in the letter to Ashur is the most detailed record of an act of plunder to survive from the ancient world.

> *"Into Musasir, the dwelling place of Haldia, I entered in might; in the palace, the abode of Urzana, I took up my lordly abode. The treasure-(houses), overflowing with heaped-up stores,—I broke open the seals of their treasure. [34 talents, 18] minas, of gold, 167 talents, 2½ minas of silver, white bronze, lead, carnelian, lapis lazuli ... precious stones in great quantities ..."*

Then the palace furnishings, item by item: staves and vases and chairs and drinking-cups of ivory, maple and boxwood inlaid with gold and silver; six golden daggers; eleven silver cups belonging to Rusa of Urartu, with their covers; thirty-four silver cups; fifty-four cups inlaid with silver; thirteen bronze basins; twenty-four bronze vases; a hundred and twenty bronze objects *"of the workmanship of the land, whose names are not easy to write."* Iron ovens. A hundred and thirty coloured woollen garments and purple linen.

Then he sent his officials into the temple, and the list begins again:

> *"X + 4 talents, 3 minas of gold, 162 talents, 20 minas, less 6/36, of silver, 3,600 talents of rough copper, 6 shields of gold which hung right and left in his house and shone brilliantly, with the heads of snarling dogs projecting from their centers ... 1 bolt of gold, a human finger (in form), the fastening of the door-leaf, —on top of it crouched a winged dragon, 1 peg of gold to secure the lock, to strengthen the barring of the temple ... two keys of gold (shaped like) protecting goddesses wearing the tiara, and bearing mace and ring, their feet planted upon snarling dogs, the four of them (constituting) the lock of the door."*

And on: ninety-six lances of silver, twelve great silver shields with dragon-head mouldings, sixty-seven silver basins, thirty-three chariots of silver, three hundred and ninety-three silver pans of Assyrian, Urartian and Kirhian workmanship, a gold signet ring covered in stones used for validating the decrees of the goddess Bagbartu, nine embroidered vestments of the god's own wardrobe, an ivory couch.

They took the god's clothes and the locks off his doors and wrote down the weight of each.

There is a relief from the palace at Dur-Sharrukin showing the scene, and in it two scribes stand recording the objects as they come out of the sanctuary while a seated Assyrian official supervises the count. The relief itself no longer exists: it went into the Tigris in 1855 with the rest of Botta's shipment, and survives only in Eugène Flandin's excavation drawing. There is a certain fitness in the fact that the best surviving image of Assyrian plunder was itself lost in transit.

What one afternoon was worth

Converted into modern weights the figures are difficult to hold in the head, and the conversions should be given with their uncertainties attached, because the ancient talent is not everywhere the same and the texts are damaged.

Musasir yielded, on Karen Radner's reckoning, something over a tonne of gold and about ten tonnes of silver, along with the copper, the bronze, the ivory and the rest. Luckenbill's talent figures give the same order of magnitude. Older popular accounts run higher; the range is real and the honest statement is that a single mountain sanctuary produced precious metal in the tonnes.

Three years earlier Sargon had done the same thing to Carchemish, and the return there was larger. Carchemish was a small kingdom in a very good position: it controlled a major Euphrates crossing at the junction between the Mediterranean coast, Anatolia and Mesopotamia, and it had been taking a cut of the traffic for centuries. Its treasury, when Sargon opened it in 717, held more than sixty tonnes of silver, three hundred and thirty kilograms of refined gold, and large quantities of bronze, tin, iron and ivory.

Now the two facts that turn this from an inventory into an argument.

The first is why the campaigns were fought. Radner's judgement on Carchemish is blunt and this study accepts it: the conquest allowed Sargon to compensate for the costs of the permanent and intensive deployment of the army since the beginning of his reign. He had come to the throne in a coup, faced revolt in the heartland and in the west, and kept the army in the field continuously for five years, and by 717 he had to pay for it. Carchemish was a treaty ally of long standing. He attacked it anyway, on the charge that its king had betrayed him to his enemies, and took the treasury. Musasir

three years later was, in Radner's reading, motivated in the same way — by the wealth of the shrine rather than by the oath-breaking of Urzana, which was the pretext.

The previous modules showed the conversion of an enemy into an oath-breaker and named it as the empire's central legal fiction. This is what the fiction was *for*. It supplied, on demand, a lawful description under which a solvent ally could be robbed.

The second fact is what the money bought. The two hauls together funded the construction of Dur-Sharrukin — the capital begun in 713, finished in 706, abandoned in 705. Sargon's own palace reliefs depict the sack of Musasir on the walls of the building the sack had paid for.

The currency event

And then Sargon wrote down something that no other ruler in this collection has been found saying.

Describing the treasures heaped up in his new city, his scribes record: *"goods without number, such as my fathers had not received, in Dur-Sharrukin, my city, I heaped up and in Assyria (people) bought (things) at a price in silver like that in copper."*

Read that twice. The king of Assyria is boasting that his conquests brought in so much silver that in Assyria silver traded at the price of base metal. He is advertising, as the crowning proof of his success, a collapse in the value of the thing he had been extracting.

And it is not merely rhetorical. The standard reading of what the Carchemish treasury did to Assyria is that the influx permanently converted the Assyrian economy from a bronze-based system to a silver-based one, running on the weight standard of Carchemish itself. A single act of plunder re-based a national currency, and the currency it installed was the one belonging to the kingdom that had been robbed.

The module will not over-interpret this. It is one sentence, in a damaged text, in a genre built for boasting, and there is no price series from Assyria against which to test it. But it should be left standing, because it is the closest thing the ancient record offers to a state announcing that it had extracted so much that extraction had stopped meaning anything.

Four streams, which are not the same thing

Systematise, because the Assyrian income came in through four mechanisms with completely different properties, and the difference between them is the whole of this module's argument.

Booty. One-off, taken by force, enormous, and unrepeatable against a given target. Musasir and Carchemish are the type. The defining feature is that the wealth taken had been accumulated by somebody else over a long period and is now gone.

Tribute. Annual, assessed on a vassal king, delivered by him. Cheap to collect, because the vassal does the collecting and bears the political cost of it. Limited in amount, and structurally fragile: it continues exactly as long as the vassal's arithmetic says that not paying is worse, which is the calculation the previous module examined.

Tax. Recurring, levied on provinces: the corn tax and the straw tax, quota deliveries in kind, the horse levy that fills the Nimrud Horse Lists. Reliable and renewable — but it requires a governor, a staff, a garrison, a road and a set of post stations, all of which cost money. A province yields net revenue only if the tax exceeds the administration, and there is no reason to assume every province did.

People and labour. Corvée on the building programmes, and the deportation system: on Oded's much-qualified extrapolation, something in the order of four and a half million people moved over two and a half centuries, with the great majority resettled in the heartland. This is the largest extraction the empire performed and it is the one nobody totals, because it does not arrive as metal and cannot be weighed.

To these should be added the audience gift, the *nāmurtu*, presented by officials and clients when admitted to the presence — a formalised skim on office-holding — and the regular offerings by which the provinces fed the god at Assur, a fixed obligation running from named districts to the temple table.

Where it went

Four destinations, and the list is short.

The temples took a share and it was substantial: the daily provision of the god at Assur was underwritten from provincial deliveries, and Sargon claims to have given a hundred and fifty talents of gold to the gods at Babylon alone. The army took a share directly, since booty was distributed among the soldiers, which means a portion of the payroll was met out of what the payroll had just captured. The building programme took the largest visible share — Kalhu, then Dur-Sharrukin, then Nineveh, three capitals in a hundred and fifty years, each built from the ground up. And the residue went to the treasury and, through grants, into the estates of the magnates and the officer class described in Module 2.

What is not on the list is as important as what is. There is no investment in the productive capacity of the provinces beyond what the army and the postal system required. No irrigation works in Samerina, no harbours for the Phoenician cities, no restoration of the Carchemish trade the treasury had funded. The canal that

Sennacherib cut, and the orchard plots he distributed, were at Nineveh. **The extraction ran in one direction and nothing came back down the road except soldiers and governors.**

Both voices on a single payment

There is exactly one Assyrian extraction for which an independent account of the same transaction survives, and the comparison is instructive.

Sennacherib on the settlement with Hezekiah of Judah in 701: *"In addition to 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver, (there were) gems, antimony, jewels, large sandu-stones, couches of ivory, house chairs of ivory, elephant's hide, ivory, maple, boxwood, all kinds of valuable treasures, as well as his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians, (which) he had them bring after me to Nineveh, my royal city."*

And the Judahite account, in 2 Kings 18:14: *"And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."*

The gold agrees exactly. The silver differs by a factor of nearly three.

Nobody can settle which is right and this study will not pretend to. The Assyrian figure may be inflated; alternatively the Hebrew historian may be recording the assessment while Sennacherib records what actually arrived, which would be consistent with the next verses, in which Hezekiah empties the temple treasury and strips the gold from the doors and pillars to find the money. Both may be partly true.

But note the shape of the disagreement, because it matters for how the rest of this study reads Assyrian numbers. The two accounts agree precisely on the gold and diverge on the silver. That is not the pattern one gets from invention. It is the pattern one gets from two administrations recording a real transaction from different sides, at different moments, with different definitions of what counted. **The Assyrian tribute figures are claims, but they are claims of a checkable kind**, which puts them in a different evidentiary class from the campaign narratives, where the king never loses and the casualties are liturgical.

And note the last item in Sennacherib's inventory. After the ivory and the boxwood come Hezekiah's daughters, his harem, and his musicians, in the same list, in the same sentence, itemised with the furniture.

Did it pay?

Now the structural question, which the Assyrians never asked in any surviving document and which their behaviour answers for them.

Booty is a stock. Tribute and tax are flows. The distinction is elementary and it is fatal, because the commitments Assyria took on were flows: a standing army paid in rations and land, three capital cities under construction, a road and relay network requiring maintenance in every province, a deportation programme that moved and provisioned populations continuously, and a temple establishment with fixed daily obligations.

Assyria met those recurring commitments, in significant part, out of non-recurring receipts. Radner says so of Carchemish in plain words: the conquest compensated for the costs of the army to date. That is a state paying its wage bill by selling the furniture — except that the furniture belonged to someone else and had to be conquered first.

The arrangement has a term limit written into it, and the limit is the supply of accumulated treasuries. Musasir was worth a tonne of gold because a shrine there had been receiving votive deposits since at least the late third millennium. Carchemish was worth sixty tonnes of silver because it had been taking a percentage of the Euphrates trade for centuries. Neither could be robbed twice. Once the ancient hoards of the Near East had been opened, there were no more ancient hoards.

Watch, then, where the great sacks come from as the empire ages. Musasir in 714, in the mountains north-east of Nineveh. Babylon in 689, three hundred kilometres south. Memphis in 671 and Thebes in 667, in Egypt, at the far end of the Levant. Susa in 647, across the Tigris and into Elam. Each is further away than the last; each costs more to reach; and Egypt, the richest of them, could not be held at all and was lost within a generation of being taken.

That is a declining-return curve, and it is legible on a map.

Reading extraction against the framework

The collection asks of any order what was taken, from whom, and by what mechanism. Assyria suggests that a prior question has to be asked first, and it is the finding this module contributes.

Extraction must be sorted into what is drawn from a flow the extracted population reproduces every year, and what is drawn from a stock it took centuries to accumulate — because the two look identical in the year they are collected and behave completely differently over a generation. A grain tax on the Harran plain can be levied every year until the climate changes. The treasury of Carchemish can be taken once. An order that has priced its recurring commitments against its one-off receipts is insolvent in a way its own accounts cannot show it, because in any single year the books balance and the treasury is full. The failure, when it

comes, does not announce itself as a fiscal failure at all. It announces itself as a shortage of suitable targets.

Assyria ran a stock economy dressed as a flow economy for something over a century, and it did so with genuine administrative skill: the tribute was assessed, the taxes were audited, the deliveries were logged, the disputes over exemption reached the king's desk. None of that competence could correct the underlying category error, because the category error was not visible from inside the system. It was visible only in the geography of where the next campaign had to go.

Two consequences follow.

The first is that this module completes a convergence which the study should now name, because it has arrived from four independent directions. **Module 1** found that a floor built on reach must be re-demonstrated every season or it stops pricing anything, which makes the campaign structurally annual. **Module 3** found that the robe converts that military necessity into a religious duty which nobody in the hierarchy can decline without impiety. **Module 5** found that the free Assyrian's benefit column was funded from transfers that only continued while the conquests did, so that stopping would impose a visible loss on precisely the population the state depended on. And **Module 6** finds that the fiscal base was stock rather than flow, so that stopping meant running out of money.

Four subsystems — military, theological, social and fiscal — each independently making expansion compulsory, and no institution anywhere in the empire with either the standing or the vocabulary to say that it should stop. That is not an empire that chose to keep conquering. **It is an empire in which the assumption of continued conquest had been built into every load-bearing structure, so that the assumption became unfalsifiable from within.** A state can survive one such dependency; it can perhaps manage two. Assyria had four, mutually reinforcing, and each of them would have had to be dismantled before any of the others could be.

The second consequence concerns what extraction does to the place extracted from, and it is the fiscal expression of something the formation module found in another register.

The sixty tonnes of silver in the Carchemish treasury was not a hoard sitting idle. It was the working capital of a trading city — the reserve against which its merchants operated and its position on the river was monetised. Taking it did not simply impoverish Carchemish for a season; it removed the mechanism by which that region had generated anything worth taking, and the empire that took it made no attempt to rebuild the mechanism, because nothing in Assyrian practice provided for reinvestment in a conquered place. **Assyrian extraction was, as a rule, terminal to its source.**

Which supplies a second and quite sufficient reason the frontier had to keep moving: not merely that the state needed more, but that behind the frontier there was progressively less.

And that is the same finding the study reached about people. The empire was extremely good at subtraction — of populations from their communities, of treasuries from their cities, of kingdoms from the map — and had no method whatever for what came afterwards. It could dissolve a people and could not specify what they became. It could open a treasury and could not restore the trade that had filled it. In both registers the operation was one-way, and in both the state's own records show it counting what it had removed with great precision and never once counting what had been there before.

A note on sources. Extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: the sack of Musasir from Sargon II's Letter to the God Ashur — the breaking of the seals and the palace inventory (vol. II, §§ 172–173) and the temple inventory following; Sargon on the treasures heaped at Dur-Sharrukin and the price of silver (§ 28); Sennacherib on Hezekiah's payment (§ 240, with parallels at §§ 284, 312). Scriptural quotation is from the Authorised Version: 2 Kings 18:14. **Flags:** the Musasir inventory is damaged in places and Luckenbill's figures carry restorations, marked in his brackets; several of the object-names he transliterates rather than translates are still not securely identified, which is itself an indication of how specific the list is. The talent is not a fixed weight across the ancient Near East, and conversions to modern units are approximations.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The tonnages for Carchemish (more than sixty tonnes of silver, 330 kg of refined gold) and Musasir (over a tonne of gold, about ten tonnes of silver), the judgement that the Carchemish campaign was undertaken to meet the costs of the army's continuous deployment, the reading of Musasir as motivated by the shrine's wealth rather than by Urzana's oath-breaking, the funding of Dur-Sharrukin from the two hauls, and the conclusion that the silver influx permanently shifted Assyria from a bronze-based to a silver-based system on the Carchemish standard all follow Karen Radner's account of Sargon II's reign for the Assyrian Empire Builders project. The comparative booty and tribute totals for Adad-nirari III, Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II and Sennacherib follow Marco De Odorico's study of numbers in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, as summarised in recent work on ancient gold–silver ratios. The regular temple offerings at Assur follow Stefan Maul's work on the god's daily provision and Postgate's on the Middle Assyrian offerings system, from which the Neo-Assyrian arrangement descends. Deportation

figures are Oded's, as in Module 4; the fiscal categories are Postgate's, as in Module 2. The loss of the Musasir relief in the Tigris in 1855 and its survival in Flandin's drawing are standard in the excavation literature.

Weak links, stated plainly. The silver-price sentence is a single clause in a damaged inscription, in a genre designed to exaggerate, and there is no Assyrian price series against which to test it; the monetary conclusion drawn from it rests on Radner's independent judgement about the Carchemish influx rather than on the boast itself, and a reader who discounts the boast entirely loses the rhetoric but not the argument. The four income streams are analytically clean and the ancient categories were not: *madattu*, *nāmurtu*, *iškāru* and *šallatu* overlap in practice and the same delivery could be recorded under more than one head. The claim that provinces did not always yield net revenue after administration is a structural inference, not something any Assyrian document states; no Assyrian balance sheet survives and none may ever have existed. The declining-return curve traced through Musasir, Babylon, Egypt and Susa is a real pattern in the geography of the great sacks, but the sample is four events across seventy years and other explanations — strategic opportunity, dynastic ambition, the accidents of who rebelled when — are available and are not excluded. And the Hezekiah discrepancy is one datum; the inference that Assyrian tribute figures generally belong to a more reliable class than Assyrian campaign narratives is suggested by it but not established by it.

MODULE 7

In the Ears of the People That Are on the Wall

Module 7 · Information & Suppression — the two information systems Assyria ran at once under opposite rules, the king who deliberately crowded his own seam, and what the apparatus manufactured besides knowledge

An argument beneath a wall

In 701 BC an Assyrian officer stood outside Jerusalem and shouted at the population over the heads of their government.

The Judahite negotiators tried to stop him. The Hebrew historian preserves the exchange:

> *"Then said Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebna, and Joah, unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and talk not with us in the Jews' language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. But Rabshakeh said unto them, Hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee, to speak these words? hath he not sent me to the men which sit on the wall, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss with you? Then Rabshakeh stood and cried with a loud voice in the Jews' language..."*

Three things are in that passage and each of them matters.

The first is the officials' request itself, which is a piece of linguistic evidence they did not intend to give. They ask for Aramaic *because they understand it* and because the men on the wall do not. In 701, Aramaic is the language two governments use to speak to each other and Judahite is the language of the street. That is the language shift traced in a previous module, caught in a single sentence from the wrong side.

The second is the Rabshakeh's refusal, which is explicit about the operation he is conducting. He has not been sent to their master. He has been sent to the men on the wall. He then raises his voice and delivers the rest in their language.

And the third is what he actually says once he has their attention, which is worth having because it is not what one would expect. He offers terms — make your peace with me, and each of you will eat of his own vine and drink of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, that you may live and not die. And he makes a theological argument: he claims to be there

on the instruction of their own god. *Am I now come up without the LORD against this place to destroy it? The LORD said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.*

What that does to the previous finding

An earlier module argued that the Assyrian robe was cut for the payers rather than the payees — that the elaborate self-justification was addressed to the god, the court, the army and posterity, and that no attempt was ever made to explain Assyria to the conquered. That module flagged, as its weakest point, that a single securely vernacular justificatory address to a subject population would qualify the argument substantially.

This is close to one, and the honest move is to refine the claim rather than defend it.

What survives is a distinction between two kinds of address, and it is a real distinction rather than a rescue. The Rabshakeh's speech is *operational*. It is delivered by a man who wants a gate opened this week, it offers a concrete transaction, and it is aimed at a population that has not yet been conquered and is being invited to change that. It is a sales pitch under a wall. It is not an account of why Assyrian rule is just, it does not describe the order the listeners would be joining, and there is no evidence that anything of the kind was ever said to a population already inside the empire.

So the refined finding is this: **Assyria addressed conquered populations only where the address had an immediate operational payoff, and never as a standing justification.** Which is precisely the behaviour one would predict of an empire that had decided not to form the conquered at all — talk to them when you need the gate open, and never again afterwards.

It is worth noticing, too, what the Rabshakeh reaches for when he needs an argument. He does not tell the men on the wall about Ashur. He tells them that *their* god has sent him. The oath-breaking apparatus described earlier — the conversion of enemies into sinners against a divine order — is here turned outward for one afternoon and run on borrowed theology, because the Assyrian version would have meant nothing to the audience. An empire that spoke to its subjects regularly would have had a vocabulary for this. Assyria had to improvise.

What reached the king

Turn inward, where the evidence is far denser, because the Assyrian state ran the most extensive information-gathering operation in the world before Rome and a great deal of it survives.

The archives at Nineveh and Kalhu have yielded thousands of letters written to the king by governors, generals, priests, scholars, agents and private persons — enough that

the modern edition runs to more than twenty volumes and is still being added to. They came in over the relay system described in an earlier module, which could put a despatch from the western frontier on the king's desk in under five days.

Beneath the ordinary administrative traffic ran something more specialised. Peter Dubovský's reconstruction of the Assyrian intelligence services, built out of the Nimrud and Nineveh letters, describes networks of informants operating across the frontier and inside the vassal states, reporting on Urartu, Elam and the Levant, with a documented practice of collecting sensitive information, transmitting it by defined channels, and — the point that matters most here — double-checking it against independent sources. A single letter from a frontier post might carry a compilation of reports covering the whole of Urartu: a war in the Mannean country south of Lake Urmia, and the movements of the Urartian king at Tushpa on Lake Van.

And the obligation to report was not merely administrative. It was sworn. The succession oath examined in the formation module required every swearer to report seditious talk — from a family member or from anyone else — on pain of death for himself and his household. The letters show the clause in operation. When a conspiracy formed around a court figure named Sasi in Esarhaddon's reign, one Nabu-rehtu-usur wrote directly to the king about it, and among the details he reported was a slave girl who had prophesied against the family and the seed of Sennacherib; he asked that the guards who had brought her be ordered to hand her over for questioning.

That is a state in which a prophecy uttered by a slave in a provincial town could reach the king's desk within days, because a private man had a legal duty to write and a road system to write over.

The king who crowded his own seam

Now the sharpest thing in this study.

An Assyrian king could not verify most of what he was told. He was in Nineveh; the events were in Que, or Elam, or the marshes. And he was dependent, absolutely and without alternative, on a class of interpreters whose work he had no independent means of checking: the scholars. Astrologers, exorcists, diviners who read the liver of a sheep, physicians, lamentation-priests. They observed the sky, consulted the omen series, and told the king what the gods intended by what had happened.

That is a monopoly on interpretation of the purest kind available anywhere in this collection. A man who owns the only reading of the only available sign owns the decision.

And the Sargonid kings appear to have broken it deliberately.

They maintained scholars reporting on the same celestial events from Nineveh and from the Assyrian cities, and from Babylon, Borsippa, Cutha, Dilbat, Ur and Uruk in the south. Separate men, in separate cities, hundreds of kilometres apart, watching the same sky on the same night and sending independent reports on the same phenomenon. The surviving corpus of astrological reports contains multiple accounts of single events, and the letters show the consequence: scholars disagree, correct one another, dispute readings, accuse rivals of incompetence, complain of being passed over, and press their own interpretations against colleagues they name.

Read that structurally rather than devotionally. A king who merely wanted divine sanction for what he had already decided would have needed one astrologer. A king who wanted to know what was actually in the sky, and what the tradition actually said about it, needed several who could contradict each other and who had no way to coordinate their answers in advance.

This is the crowded seam, built deliberately, inside an autocracy, by men who had worked out that a single interpreter cannot be checked. It is the most sophisticated institutional arrangement in this study and it worked: the reports are demonstrably more accurate for it, and the astronomical record the Assyrian scholars generated is good enough that modern astronomers use it.

But hold the discipline, because the qualification is as important as the finding. The seam was crowded for exactly one man. The governor of Que got no second opinion about anything; the deportee at Guzana got none; the scholars themselves were checked but did not get to check. The plurality was an instrument of the apex, adopted because the apex had a personal and urgent interest in accuracy that nobody else's superior shared. Nothing about it was a liberty, and nobody proposed extending it.

What the apparatus manufactured

The information system did not only report. It generated obligations, and some of them were lethal.

The clearest case is the substitute king. When the omens indicated that a particular kind of lunar eclipse threatened the life of the king, the prescribed response was to install a substitute on the throne, allow the portent to discharge itself upon him, and then kill him. Five performances are documented between 679 and 666.

In one of them, a young man named Damqi, son of the chief administrator of the temples of Akkad — a member of the Babylonian elite — was enthroned as substitute for Esarhaddon and for Esarhaddon's son Shamash-shumu-ukin, and died with his queen. The report to the king came from Mar-Issar, Esarhaddon's own agent in Babylonia, and its texture is the thing to notice. It states, in the dry register of an

administrative return, that the pair had ruled Assyria, Babylonia and all the countries; that they had gone to their fate for the king's redemption; that the burial chamber had been prepared and the two of them decorated, treated, displayed, buried and wailed over as a king and queen should be; that the burnt offering had been made; that *"all portents were cancelled"*; that the apotropaic rituals, the exorcisms, the penitential psalms and the omen litanies had been performed to perfection. And it closes with the formula that closes a thousand Assyrian letters: the king, my lord, should know.

Then it adds that the people of Akkad had been frightened and had been calmed, and that the officials of Babylonia had been frightened too.

An apparatus built to reduce the king's uncertainty had produced, as its routine output, an instruction that a named man and his wife be killed, honoured, and buried, and a report confirming that this had been done to standard. Some scholars have suggested that the selection of a young Babylonian notable rather than the usual condemned criminal may not have been accidental, and that the ritual served a second purpose in a city Assyria was struggling to hold. The suggestion is plausible and it cannot be proved.

What can be said without speculation is that the seam is not merely a place where belief is managed. **It is a place where obligations are manufactured, and the obligations fall on people who had no hand in generating them.**

Two systems, opposite rules

Now the finding that organises the module, and it emerges from a comparison the archives make unavoidable.

The Assyrian correspondence is astonishingly frank. Officials report shortages, delays, failures, desertions, their own errors and each other's. A scholar informs the king that a man the king has just promoted is a drunkard. Governors quarrel in writing over grain. A frontier officer explains that he cannot dispatch a convoy of deportees because he has not got his donkeys yet. Nobody in this correspondence is pretending everything is fine, and there is no sign that anyone was punished for saying it was not.

And the monuments, produced by the same state in the same decades, contain not one recorded defeat in three centuries.

These are not inconsistent. They are two information systems, running simultaneously, under opposite rules, because they face in opposite directions.

The upward system — subject to king — is optimised for accuracy, and it is optimised for accuracy because the recipient bears the cost of error. A king who is told that the harvest is fine when it is not will muster an army he cannot feed. So the rules of that system are: report bad news, report it fast, expect to be cross-checked

against someone who saw the same thing, and expect the king to have read the other man's letter.

The outward and upward-to-the-god system — king to Ashur, to the court, to posterity — is optimised for the record, and it is optimised for the record because the recipient bears no cost at all and cannot answer back. A god does not muster an army on bad information. A successor three reigns hence cannot audit the claim. So the rules of that system are the opposite: never record a failure, and where the facts are uncooperative, change the verb.

The same scribes wrote both. There is no evidence that anybody found this strange, and there is no reason they should have. The two documents were doing different jobs for different readers.

Where the systems met: the twentieth of Tebet

The limit of an information monopoly is that it controls only what it writes.

In January 681 BC Sennacherib — the destroyer of Babylon, the besieger of Jerusalem, the builder of Nineveh — was murdered by his own sons inside his own citadel. It is one of the best-attested events in ancient history, and it is best attested from outside.

The Babylonian chronicle disposes of it in a sentence: on the twentieth day of the month Tebet, Sennacherib king of Assyria, his son killed him in a rebellion. A stele of Nabonidus, more than a century later, says only that the assassin was the offspring of his own heart, and names nobody. The Hebrew historian names two of them, puts the killing in the house of Nisroch as the king was worshipping, and has them escape into the land of Ararat. The Assyrian royal inscriptions of Esarhaddon, who won the ensuing civil war, describe a conspiracy and his own divinely warranted victory over it, and Assyrian sources now allow the ringleader to be identified as Arda-Mulissu, the Adrammelech of the Hebrew account.

So: the fullest narrative comes from the successor who had every reason to shape it, the flattest and most reliable dating comes from a hostile foreign chronicle, and the names and the location come from a small kingdom four hundred miles away that Assyria had failed to take twenty years earlier.

That is the structural limit, and it is worth stating as a general proposition because it will matter at the end of this study. **An information monopoly controls what it writes and nothing that anybody else writes, so that the moment an event is large enough to be visible from outside the system, the monopoly's own silence becomes evidence.** The gaps in the Assyrian record are not random. They are exactly

the shape of what the genre forbade, which means a reader who knows the genre can locate them.

Reading information against the framework

Three findings, and the first two are the substantial ones.

One: the direction an archive faces determines its rules, and it should be the first question asked of any archive. This collection has generally treated an order's records as a single thing — the story it tells about itself — and has read them for what they conceal. Assyria shows that a single order routinely produces two bodies of record with opposite optimisation, and that the difference is not hypocrisy or inconsistency but a rational response to who bears the cost of error. Information travelling toward a decision-maker who will act on it is disciplined by consequences. Information travelling toward a god, a monument or a posterity that cannot act is disciplined by nothing but genre. **Where a study finds an archive, it should ask which way the document was facing before it asks whether the document is true**, because the answer to the first question largely predicts the answer to the second. The Assyrian letters are trustworthy about grain and untrustworthy about nothing much; the Assyrian annals are trustworthy about buildings and worthless about outcomes; and it is the same state, the same decade, sometimes the same hand.

Two: the crowded seam can be built by an autocrat, for himself, and this does not make it a liberty. The framework's reformist conclusion has been that since no one can be freed from depending on interpreters, the only available freedom lies in the structure of the interpreters one must depend on — plural, competing, contestable, none able to silence the rest. Assyria supplies the strongest demonstration in this collection that the mechanism works, and the least comfortable one. The Sargonid kings assembled precisely the recommended structure: nine cities of scholars, mutually invisible, professionally competitive, reporting independently on the same events, unable to collude and unable to be individually decisive. And it delivered exactly what the framework predicts — a more accurate picture, forgeries harder to sustain, a single interpreter's error correctable by another's.

It was available to one man.

Which yields the refinement, and it is not a small one. **Plurality of interpreters is an instrument before it is a liberty, and a state will adopt it wherever the apex has a personal stake in accuracy — for reasons that have nothing whatever to do with anybody's freedom.** The structure that liberates when everyone can stand at the point where the reports converge is merely efficient when only the king can stand there. The difference between the two is not in the architecture of the seam. It is in who is

permitted to occupy the position where the contradictions become visible. An order can therefore be simultaneously the most sophisticated information-gathering apparatus of its age and among the most closed, and Assyria was both, and there is no contradiction in it at all.

Three, and smaller: what the seam produces is not only belief. Damqi died because an eclipse occurred, a series was consulted, a reading was returned, a ritual was prescribed, and a competent official carried out the instruction and filed a report confirming that all portents had been cancelled. Nobody in that chain was cynical and nobody was disobedient. The apparatus generated an obligation, the obligation was lethal, and it fell on a man selected by the apparatus rather than by anyone's malice. This collection has tended to examine the seam as the place where a governing class manages what a people believes. Assyria adds that a mature interpretive apparatus also manufactures *duties* — commitments nobody chose, which the order must then discharge — and that these can be as costly as anything the belief itself achieves.

A note on sources. Scriptural quotation is from the Authorised Version, which is public domain: 2 Kings 18:26–28 for the exchange beneath the wall, 18:25 for the Rabshakeh's appeal to Yahweh, 18:31–32 for the terms offered, and 19:37 for the assassination of Sennacherib. No Assyrian primary text is quoted at length in this module, since the material it depends on — the royal correspondence, the astrological reports and the scholars' letters — survives only in modern copyrighted editions.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited throughout. The Assyrian intelligence services, including the collection, transmission and double-checking of sensitive information and the compilation of frontier reports on Urartu, follow Peter Dubovský, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies* (Rome, 2006), and his later study of Sennacherib's Levantine campaign through the same lens. The royal correspondence is edited across the State Archives of Assyria series, principally by Parpola, Lanfranchi, Fuchs, Luukko, Van Buylaere, Reynolds, Dietrich, Cole, Machinist and Frame; the letter reporting the Sasi conspiracy and the prophesying slave girl is in Luukko and Van Buylaere's edition of Esarhaddon's political correspondence. The scholars' letters are Parpola's *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (SAA 10), with his earlier two-volume commentary; the astrological reports are Hermann Hunger's (SAA 8), and the geographical spread of the reporting network — Nineveh and the Assyrian cities together with Babylon, Borsippa, Cutha, Dilbat, Ur and Uruk — follows Hunger and David Brown. The substitute king ritual follows Parpola's excursus on the subject and the recent synthesis of the *šar pūḫi* sources; the report of Damqi's death is Mar-Issar's letter to Esarhaddon in SAA 10, from which only the phrase *"all portents were cancelled"* is quoted directly. The identification of Arda-

Mulissu as the ringleader of Sennacherib's murder, and the correlation with the Hebrew Adrammelech, follows the standard reconstruction; the Babylonian chronicle entry and the Nabonidus stele are cited from that literature.

Weak links, stated plainly. The Rabshakeh speech survives only in the Hebrew account, was written down by the party it was aimed at, and is a set-piece of considerable literary sophistication; whether anything close to those words was spoken cannot be established, and the qualification this module draws from it would be weaker still if the speech were wholly a Judahite composition. The claim that the Sargonid kings maintained overlapping scholarly reporting *in order to* cross-check is an inference from the structure of the surviving corpus and from the visible competition among the scholars; no Assyrian document states the intention, and an alternative reading — that the redundancy was an artefact of patronage rather than a design for accuracy — is available and cannot be excluded. The characterisation of the correspondence as frank is drawn from a corpus that survives because it reached the palace, and letters that were never sent, or were destroyed, are by definition not in it. The political reading of Damqi's selection is one scholar's suggestion and is flagged as such. And the general proposition about upward-facing versus outward-facing archives is this study's own generalisation from a single case; it is offered for testing against the other studies in this collection rather than as an established result.

MODULE 8

The Bearded and the Eunuchs

Module 8 · Elite Coordination & the Default — why men who did not like each other held the arrangement up for three centuries, why every fracture came at the same point, and what happens when a device built to remove one motive concentrates the rest

A list of everyone who mattered

In the winter of 669 BC Esarhaddon died on the road to Egypt, and within weeks a document was drawn up at Nineveh binding the empire to his chosen successor. It was not written by a king. It was written by his mother.

The treaty of Zakutu — Naqi'a, a woman of probably West Semitic origin who had been a secondary wife of Sennacherib, was never certainly queen, and held no office at all — opens by naming the parties it binds, and the list is the Assyrian hierarchy enumerating itself at the moment of maximum danger:

with Shamash-shumu-ukin, the new king's equal brother; with Shamash-metu-uballit and the rest of his brothers; with the king's relatives; with the officials and the governors; **with the bearded and the eunuchs**; with the courtiers; with the exempted people; with everyone who enters the palace; and with the people of Assyria, small and great.

Read the categories, because every one of them is a group with standing and means, and every one of them is being asked, by a dowager with no formal power whatever, to hold still.

The brothers, who have claims. The relatives, who have expectations. The governors, who have provinces. The bearded officers and the eunuch officers, named as two distinct constituencies with distinct interests, which they were. The courtiers, who have access. The exempted people — the beneficiaries of the tax privileges examined earlier — who have a standing grievance if anyone reopens the question of who pays. And everyone who enters the palace, which is the operative phrase, because proximity was itself a form of capital.

It is, so far as anyone knows, the only text of its kind produced by someone other than an Assyrian king. That a woman without office could impose it, and that it appears to have worked, tells you where power actually sat in the Assyrian arrangement — not in a constitution, and not entirely in the crown, but in the willingness of a defined group of people to go on treating each other's positions as settled.

This module is about that willingness: why it held for three centuries, and why it broke at exactly the same point every time.

The currency of the default

The question is not why the men at the top obeyed the king. Frequently they did not, and several of them killed one. The question is why a hierarchy of ambitious, mutually suspicious officers went on defending an arrangement rather than dismantling it, across ten generations, without any of them needing to be persuaded of anything.

The answer is that the arrangement paid every one of them in a currency only the arrangement could issue.

Consider what an Assyrian magnate actually held. He held an office — one of the seven great posts, or a governorship — which was his by appointment and, importantly, was *not* hereditary; the evidence for magnate offices passing from father to son is weak enough that specialists have argued against it. He held estates granted by the crown, in districts where his neighbours were other officers, and exemptions that existed only because a king had sealed a document saying so. He drew a share of booty, distributed to the army and its commanders after every successful campaign. And he held his year in the eponym rotation, which followed a fixed order of precedence, so that the Assyrian calendar itself was a public recitation of the pecking order and every dated document in the empire named a man in it.

None of that was portable. A magnate who left, or lost, had nothing. His wealth was in land the crown had granted and could confiscate; his standing was in an office the crown filled; his name was in a list the crown maintained. There was no other Assyria to take it to, and — as the fugitive material in an earlier module showed — the neighbouring powers had a mutual extradition arrangement.

So the default was well constructed, and its construction is worth stating exactly. **Every position in the arrangement was denominated in a currency that only the arrangement issued, that could not be converted into anything outside it, and that was forfeited entirely on defection.** A magnate did not have to like the king, admire the arrangement, or believe a word of the theology. He had only to notice that everything he possessed existed inside a structure whose collapse would take all of it, and to act accordingly. And by acting accordingly — by defending his own province, his own estates, his own place in the rotation — he defended the whole thing without intending to.

One further feature made the arrangement unusually cohesive, and it links back to the fiscal finding. Because a substantial part of elite income arrived as a share of

plunder, the magnates' benefit column was tied directly to expansion. A general who despised the king still wanted next year's campaign. That is a very economical way to align an officer corps, and it is one more entry on the list of Assyrian subsystems that made stopping impossible.

The men who could not have sons

Set into this arrangement was a device the Assyrians used more systematically than anyone else in this collection, and the reasoning behind it is not obscure: eunuchs were appointed to high office because a man who could father no children could found no dynasty, and therefore — in the Assyrian assessment — could not become a rival line.

The device is elegant and it did real work. A bearded magnate with a province, an army and three sons is a dynasty waiting for an opportunity. The same man without the sons is merely a very powerful servant. Staffing the summit with such men, alongside the bearded officers rather than instead of them, gave the crown a class of senior officials whose ambition had, by construction, nowhere generational to go.

But work out what the device actually removes and what it leaves, because this is where the module is going.

It removes the *dynastic* motive: the desire to convert present position into a permanent family claim. It does not remove the *positional* motive — the desire to hold and keep one's own office — and there is a reasonable case that it sharpens it. A man with heirs has a long horizon and a diversified stake: he can accept a demotion now if his son's prospects survive it. A man with no heirs has neither. His entire capital is his present standing, his horizon is his own lifetime, and a threat to his office is a threat to everything he will ever have.

The Assyrians appear to have assumed that removing the first motive made such a man safe. Three centuries later they discovered otherwise, and the discovery is the last event in this module.

When the default swallowed the crown

The first serious test came early, and it was not a rebellion. It was the default working so well that it made the king optional.

Between the civil war at the end of Shalmaneser III's reign and the accession of Tiglath-pileser III in 745 — roughly eighty years — Assyrian kings were weak and Assyrian magnates were not. The clearest case is Shamshi-ilu, commander-in-chief across four reigns, who held the eponymate three separate times, in 780, 770 and 752,

and who resided not at court but at Til Barsip on the Euphrates, in what had been the capital of Bit-Adini.

His inscription on the gate lions at Til Barsip is the document to look at. It carries a full list of his titles, including *turtānu*. It deploys the traditional royal motifs — the conquering hero, the builder of his lordly city. It records that he made war at the command of Ashur. And it does not name a king.

Every element of that is a royal prerogative being exercised by a servant. Going to war in the name of Ashur was the king's warrant and nobody else's — it is the whole content of the vice-regency described at the beginning of this study. Shamshi-ilu is not rebelling; there is no revolt, no rival claimant, no break in the king list. He is simply doing the job, on the frontier, with the army, in his own name, and not mentioning his employer.

That is what the default looks like when it is working perfectly and has no counterweight. Each great officer defends his own position; the aggregate of those defences is a functioning empire; and the man in the middle becomes structurally unnecessary. The same decades carry revolts recorded at Ashur, at Arrapha and at Guzana, and the eponym entry that anchors the whole chronology of the period — the year of Bur-Sagale, 763 — records a revolt in the city of Ashur alongside the eclipse.

745: a usurper's answer

Then a man took the throne who had spent his career inside that arrangement and understood exactly what was wrong with it.

The circumstances of Tiglath-pileser III's accession are disputed and probably discreditable. There was a revolt at Kalhu in 746 or 745. Numerous officials and governors were replaced immediately afterwards. And — the detail that gives it away — he attributed his throne in his inscriptions to divine selection alone, without the customary parallel claim of royal descent, which is what a man says when he has no descent to cite.

What he did about the magnates was structural and it was quick.

He subdivided the great provinces, taking the empire from something like a dozen large governorships to more than twice that number, so that no single officer again held a territorial bloc of the kind Shamshi-ilu had held. He replaced the incumbents. And he required officials to report directly to him.

That last measure deserves more attention than it usually gets, because it explains the archive on which the previous module was built. The reading advanced in the specialist literature is that the new bureaucracy of direct royal correspondence was created as an instrument in the crown's struggle with the caste of magnates — a

channel running from every official straight to the palace, bypassing the great officers entirely, with the scribal class elevated to run it and to propagate the new dynasty's version of things.

The royal correspondence of Assyria — the largest and most revealing body of administrative letters to survive from the ancient world — exists because a usurper needed a way of knowing things his magnates could not filter.

That is worth pausing on, and it is the third or fourth time this study has arrived at the same shape. The most sophisticated information system before Rome was not designed. It was a patch, applied by a specific man, to a specific problem he had just lived through, using the materials to hand.

Esarhaddon's answer, and what it cost

The most deliberate act of institutional design in this study belongs to a king who had come to the throne through a succession war after his father was murdered by his own brothers.

In 672 Esarhaddon assembled the empire and had it swear. The succession oath bound magnates, governors, officials, courtiers, vassal kings and, in principle, every servant of the king, to enthrone Ashurbanipal as king of Assyria on his death and to recognise Shamash-shumu-ukin as king of Babylon, with Ashurbanipal senior. The terms bound the swearers' offspring. The swearers were required to transmit the obligation to their sons. The tablets were sealed with the seal of the god Ashur and set up where the swearers could see them; hundreds were produced; the ceremony was enormous; and copies went out across the empire, one of them installed in a temple sanctuary at Tell Tayinat, on the far western edge of Assyrian control.

A man who has fought his brothers for a throne is attempting to bind the future with a document, and the design is genuinely intelligent: it converts an unwritten royal prerogative into a sworn, published, divinely guaranteed obligation held by everyone who might otherwise have to choose.

Did it work? On the surface, yes. Esarhaddon died on campaign in 669 and Ashurbanipal succeeded without visible opposition.

But two things qualify the success and both are instructive. The first is that the succession had to be re-secured within weeks by a second instrument — Zakutu's — which suggests that the people concerned did not regard the 672 oath as sufficient on its own. The second is larger. In 652, sixteen years into the arrangement the treaty had established, Shamash-shumu-ukin revolted against his brother, and the empire fought four years of civil war in its own southern heartland.

The treaty had prevented the crisis it was designed to prevent, which was a fraternal coup at the moment of accession. It could not prevent the crisis its own settlement created, which was that a rival with a real position had a real base to revolt from. **A settlement generous enough to buy a claimant's acquiescence is generous enough to fund his rebellion**, and there is no obvious way to design around that, because a settlement too thin to be worth having does not buy the acquiescence in the first place.

Where the fracture came from

Now the question this module exists to answer, and the answer is unusually clean.

Fracture did not come from below. The previous modules established that the deportees never rose, the free Assyrian farmers had no reason to, the provincial peasantry left almost no trace of resistance, and the populations that did revolt continuously — the marsh Chaldeans, the desert Arabs, the mountain peoples — were outside the arrangement rather than inside it and could never have brought the state down by themselves.

Every serious internal crisis in three hundred years came from the hierarchy. And every one of them came at the same point.

826–820. Ashur-da''in-apli revolts against his father Shalmaneser III in the old king's last years. The revolt is large enough that the successor, Shamshi-Adad V, records the cities that sided with the rebel — and records, revealingly, that the rebel had imposed binding oaths on them. A claimant fighting for the succession used the crown's own instrument of coordination against the crown.

746–745. Revolt at Kalhu; Tiglath-pileser III takes the throne without a clear title; officials replaced wholesale.

722. Sargon II takes the throne seventeen days after Shalmaneser V's death, in circumstances almost certainly a coup, and justifies it — as an earlier module showed — by charging his predecessor with taxing the god's city.

681. Sennacherib is murdered by his sons in his own citadel; Esarhaddon fights a civil war to secure the throne.

652–648. Shamash-shumu-ukin against Ashurbanipal; four years of war.

631–626. Ashurbanipal dies; Ashur-etil-ilani succeeds with the backing of the chief eunuch and dies within four years; Sin-shar-ishkun succeeds; the chief eunuch revolts.

Six crises. All six at a transfer of the crown. None of them at a tax revolt, a military defeat, a religious dispute or a famine.

The reason is structural and it follows directly from how well the default was built. **The one thing the arrangement never priced was who would stand at the top of it.** There was no rule of succession the king was bound by; he named his heir, and

could change his mind, and several did. Which meant that at every accession the entire distribution of positions was reopened at once. Every magnate's estates, exemptions, office and place in the rotation were suddenly held at the discretion of a man he had not chosen, who owed him nothing, and who — as Tiglath-pileser III demonstrated in 745 — might replace the lot of them in his first year.

In that situation the rational play is to identify the likely winner early and be conspicuously useful to him. And that behaviour, viewed from the throne, is indistinguishable from conspiracy — which is why Esarhaddon's succession treaty contains clause after clause about seditious talk, about reporting family members, about the sin of even contemplating a ritual to release oneself from the oath. He was not paranoid. He was describing, accurately, what everyone in his hierarchy had every reason to be doing.

The default held perfectly between successions and failed at every one of them, and it failed for a reason internal to its own design.

The device turns

The last instance is the eunuch device failing in exactly the way the analysis above predicts.

Sin-shumu-lishir was chief eunuch — *rab ša rēši* — and had probably been a prominent courtier since Ashurbanipal's reign. When Ashurbanipal died in 631 he was instrumental in putting Ashur-etil-ilani on the throne, apparently with the help of soldiers of his own household, and he may have been the effective ruler of Assyria for the four years of that reign. When Ashur-etil-ilani died in 627 and his brother Sin-shar-ishkun took the throne, Sin-shumu-lishir's position was threatened by the new king's men.

In 626 he rebelled, took Nippur and Babylon, and claimed the throne of Assyria. He is the only eunuch known ever to have done so. He held it for three months.

The premise of the device was that a man who cannot found a dynasty cannot want a throne. The premise was false, and it was false for a reason that follows from the structure rather than from anything unusual about the man. **Removing a person's dynastic interest does not reduce his stake in the arrangement; it concentrates it entirely into his own office and his own lifetime, and therefore makes him more dangerous, not less, at the precise moment his office is threatened.** A magnate with sons might have accepted a demotion and waited. A eunuch at the end of his career, watching a new king's favourites arrive, had nothing to wait for.

And the cost was not confined to three months of confusion. His revolt broke Assyrian control in northern Babylonia at the exact moment Nabopolassar was rising

there, and Sin-shar-ishkun's failed attempt to retake Babylon in October of the same year was the last Assyrian campaign for the city. The chief eunuch's defence of his own position removed the empire's grip on its oldest and most important dependency, in the last year in which that grip could have been recovered.

Reading the default against the framework

The collection has held that stable long-term hierarchies are the ones arranged so that each participant, by defending his own position, defends the whole thing without intending to — and that fracture comes from a group with standing and means that has stopped benefiting. Assyria confirms both and sharpens the first into something more exact.

The default is strongest where the currency it pays in cannot be converted into anything outside the arrangement. Assyria did this about as well as it can be done. Office was appointive and not hereditary; estates came by royal grant and could be confiscated; exemptions existed only by sealed decree; the eponymate was a place in a list the crown kept; the booty share arrived only if the crown campaigned; and the neighbouring powers would send a fugitive back. A magnate's entire capital — economic, social and, in a real sense, personal, since his name existed publicly only as a year-name — was non-portable and forfeit on defection. That is why men who loathed one another coordinated for three hundred years without ever having to be loyal.

And here is the refinement, which is the finding this module contributes, because it is the same fact seen from the other side:

The tighter the default binds between successions, the more violent the succession must be. Non-convertibility is what makes the arrangement cohesive; it is also what makes a change at the top existential rather than merely inconvenient. If a man's capital were portable he could sit out an accession and take his position elsewhere. Because it is not, an accession is a total revaluation of everything he owns, conducted by a person he did not choose, with no appeal and no floor. **A hierarchy that has successfully made defection unthinkable has, by the same construction, made the succession the only moment at which anything can be renegotiated — and has therefore guaranteed that everything will be renegotiated then, at once, by everyone.** That is not a defect Assyria failed to notice. It is the shadow cast by the arrangement's own strength, and every Assyrian attempt to fix it — the succession treaty, the dowager's oath, Sin-shar-ishkun naming a crown prince in his first year — was an attempt to write a rule for the one thing the arrangement had left unwritten.

Two smaller findings follow.

The first concerns the eunuch device, and it generalises beyond Assyria. **An institution designed to neutralise a threat by removing one motive should be examined for what it does to the motives that remain.** Assyria removed the dynastic interest from its highest officers and did not notice that it had thereby concentrated their positional interest into a single undiversified holding with a horizon no longer than one life. The device worked for three centuries, which is a long time, and then failed in the specific manner its own design had made likely.

The second is about how any of this was built, and it now needs stating because the study keeps arriving at it. Every coordinating mechanism examined in this module was a patch applied by a named individual to a failure he had personally survived. Tiglath-pileser III subdivided the provinces because he had spent his career under Shamshi-ilu's kind of magnate. He created the direct correspondence because he needed information the magnates could not intercept. Esarhaddon wrote the succession treaty because his father had been murdered by his brothers. Zakutu imposed her oath because she had watched her son's accession war. Sin-shar-ishkun named a crown prince immediately because he had just fought two rivals for a throne.

None of it is architecture. It is scar tissue — and the most important consequence of that, for the reading of any hierarchy, is that **the sophistication of an institution is evidence about the disaster that preceded it, not about the intelligence of its design.** Assyria's coordinating apparatus looks, by the seventh century, like a system. It was an accumulation of emergency measures, each of which worked, none of which addressed the thing all of them were working around, and one of which — the correspondence — happens to be the reason we can read any of this at all.

A note on sources. No Assyrian primary text is quoted at length in this module; the material it rests on survives principally in modern copyrighted editions, and the one direct quotation is the four-word phrase *"the bearded and the eunuchs"* from the addressee list of the Zakutu treaty as edited by Parpola and Watanabe, with the remainder of that list given in paraphrase.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The Zakutu treaty is SAA 2 no. 8 in Parpola and Watanabe's *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki, 1988), with Parpola's dating of it to the weeks between Esarhaddon's death and Ashurbanipal's accession and his observation of its close relation to the 672 succession oath; Sarah Melville's study of Naqi'a underlies the account of her position and correspondence. The great offices, the eponym rotation and the argument against hereditary magnate office follow Raija Mattila's *The King's Magnates* and Karen Radner's work on the Assyrian administration. Shamshi-ilu's career, his three eponymates, his residence at Til Barsip, and the reading of the gate-lion inscription as

omitting any reigning king and claiming a royal prerogative follow Malamat, Page, Ferguson, Younger and Siddall as summarised in the recent literature on Assyrian kingship and chronology. Tiglath-pileser III's accession, the Kalhu revolt of 746/745, the wholesale replacement of officials, the subdivision of the provinces, and the argument that the new system of direct royal correspondence was built as an instrument against the magnate caste follow Postgate, Radner, Davenport and the specialist literature on the administrative reforms of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II. Esarhaddon's succession oath follows Parpola and Watanabe and Jacob Lauinger's publication of the Tayinat manuscript, as in Module 4. The career and revolt of Sin-shumu-lishir, including the reading that eunuchs were appointed because they could have no dynastic aspirations, and the effect of his three-month revolt on Assyrian control in Babylonia, follow the standard reconstruction of the final decades. Ashur-da''in-apli's revolt and the binding oaths he imposed on the cities that supported him are recorded in an inscription of Shamshi-Adad V, edited in Grayson's RIMA 3.

Weak links, stated plainly. The reading of Shamshi-ilu's Til Barsip inscription as evidence of a magnate operating without reference to royal authority is well established but not unanimous; an alternative view holds that the omission of the king's name is a convention of a particular monument type rather than a political statement, and a reader who prefers it should note that the argument here would then rest only on his three eponymates and his territorial position. The claim that magnate offices were not hereditary follows Radner against an older view and is not settled. The proposition that the direct-correspondence system was created specifically as a weapon against the magnates is an interpretation offered in the recent literature on the reforms, not a statement any Assyrian source makes. The catalogue of six succession crises is complete for the major internal upheavals but the dating and even the occurrence of some of them — particularly the relationship between Ashur-etil-ilani and Sin-shar-iškun, where a fraternal war is often assumed without supporting evidence — is uncertain. And the central proposition of this module, that non-convertibility of elite capital simultaneously strengthens the default and makes successions violent, is a generalisation from one case; it predicts that hierarchies with portable elite wealth should have calmer successions and more frequent ordinary defection, which is a testable claim this study has not tested.

MODULE 9

He Turned the Tablet Upside Down

Module 9 · Plurality or Foreclosure — the liberties that existed, who bought them and from whom, what unit they attached to, and why the thing that made them more than words was not a court but a coup

A text that reads like a constitution

Among the tablets from the royal libraries at Nineveh, catalogued in an inventory of the king's own collection, is a composition modern scholarship calls *Advice to a Prince*. It is written in the form of an omen series — a chain of conditional clauses, *if the king does this, then the god will do that* — and what it actually contains is a list of things an Assyrian or Babylonian king was forbidden to do to the citizens of three cities.

The clauses run, in paraphrase, like this. If the king improperly convicts a citizen of Sippar while acquitting a foreigner, Shamash will install a foreign justice in his land where the princes and judges will not heed justice. If citizens of Nippur are brought before him and he accepts a present and convicts them improperly, Enlil will bring a foreign army against him. If he takes the silver of the citizens of Babylon into his own coffers, or hears a lawsuit involving men of Babylon and treats it frivolously, Marduk will set his foes upon him and give his property to his enemy. If he fines the citizens of Nippur, Sippar or Babylon, or puts them in prison, the city where the fine was imposed will be overturned and a foreign enemy will walk into the prison where they were held. And if he mobilises the whole of Sippar, Nippur and Babylon and imposes forced labour on the people, exacting a corvée *at the herald's proclamation*, then Marduk will turn his land over to his enemy, so that the troops of his own land will do forced labour for that enemy.

Set out plainly, that is: due process in the courts; protection against arbitrary fine and imprisonment; a prohibition on the sovereign taking a subject's money into his personal treasury; and exemption from conscription and forced labour. The Babylonians had a word for these freedoms — *šubarrû* — and a word for the status that carried them, *kidinnūtu*, divine protection.

There is nothing else quite like it in this collection: a document, kept in the king's own library, specifying what the king may not do, and to whom.

The question this module exists to answer is whether it was worth anything.

Three tests

Was it invoked? Yes, and this is the fact that changes the character of the text entirely.

Two manuscripts survive, one from Nippur and one from Nineveh, and the Nineveh copy is listed in the catalogue of the royal library — which is to say the Assyrian king kept, indexed, in his own collection, the document that threatened him with the loss of his kingdom. More importantly, the composition is quoted in a letter sent from Nippur to an Assyrian king, asking his support to rebuild the city. Erica Reiner's study of exactly this is titled, without irony, *The Babylonian Fürstenspiegel in Practice*.

So this is not a piece of abstract wisdom literature filed with the omen series. It is a lever, held by a city, and it was used on a king who had a copy of it.

Was it enforced? Not by anything resembling a court. There was no institution in Assyria or Babylonia with the standing to compel a king, and the sanction the text itself names is divine: the god will do this to you.

But the material examined in an earlier module shows what the operative sanction actually was. When Sargon II usurped the throne in 722, his justification — the Assur Charter — accused his predecessor of imposing corvée and labour service on the citizens of Assur in violation of their status, and presented his fall as the god's judgement for it. Whether or not Shalmaneser V ever did any such thing is unknowable. What the document proves is that Sargon's court, choosing the charge most likely to make a usurpation acceptable to the Assyrian governing class, chose *he violated the city's exemption*.

The sanction, then, was not a court. It was the willingness of the elite to treat the violation as sufficient public grounds for removing a king. That is a real sanction and a spectacularly unreliable one, and the module will return to what kind of thing it makes the liberty.

Could it be destroyed? Completely, and once it was.

In 689 BC Sennacherib took Babylon and recorded what he did to it:

> *"The city and (its) houses, from its foundation to its top, I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire. The wall and outer wall, temples and gods, temple towers of brick and earth, as many as there were, I razed and dumped them into the Arahtu Canal. Through the midst of that city I dug canals, I flooded its site with water, and the very foundations thereof I destroyed. I made its destruction more complete than that by a flood. That in days to come the site of that city, and (its) temples and gods, might not be remembered, I completely blotted it out with (floods) of water and made it like a meadow."*

Babylon's charter did not survive the removal of Babylon. There is no version of *kidinnūtu* that protects a meadow.

Where it came from

Now the question that matters most, which is where a liberty of this kind comes from in the first place, because nobody in Sippar or Nippur obtained it by asking nicely.

Look at whose interests the text protects. Not a class, not a stratum, not the poor: the citizens of three ancient cult centres — the cities of Enlil's temple, Shamash's temple and Marduk's temple. Look at when the surviving manuscripts date from: the Nippur copy is eighth-century, and the composition is generally placed in the same broad period, though the archaising language makes it difficult to date. And then look at what was happening in Babylonia in the eighth and seventh centuries.

Babylonia was a contested country, and the contest was between two constituencies. On one side the old urban temple communities — literate, wealthy, institutionally continuous, running assemblies and temple estates in cities that had been there for two thousand years. On the other the Chaldean and Aramean tribal houses of the south and the marshes: Bit-Yakin, Bit-Amukani, Bit-Dakkuri, the Puqudu and the Gambulu, whose leaders repeatedly took the throne of Babylon and whom Assyria — as an earlier module established — could never subdue, because they could always go into the reeds.

Assyria could not hold Babylonia by force. It had proved that repeatedly. So it bought the cities.

Sargon II's record on this is explicit and it is not incidental to his reign. He restored privileges and remitted taxes and debts to Sippar, Nippur, Babylon and Borsippa; he pacified and exempted Der, Ur, Uruk, Eridu, Larsa, Kullab, Kisik and Nimid-Laguda; he left the Babylonian city assemblies and temple communities standing more or less as they had been; he reinstated local rulers whom Merodach-baladan had displaced; and at Nippur he confirmed the traditional governor in place rather than installing an Assyrian.

The liberties of the Babylonian cities were the price Assyria paid for urban support against the Chaldeans. They were a concession in a factional fight between two groups that both had standing and means, made by an apex that could not afford to lose and therefore had to give something to one side.

That is the mechanism the framework predicts, and it is visible here with unusual clarity because both parties to the fight are documented and the concession is itemised.

And one detail deserves its own paragraph, because it shows the manufacture of the thing in progress. Both surviving manuscripts of *Advice to a Prince* use archaising sign

values, older grammatical forms, and a density of technical logograms unusual outside scholarly literature. The specialist reading is that these are affectations, deliberately deployed to increase the text's apparent age — and that this is precisely why it cannot be dated.

The liberty was made to look old because old was the only argument available. There was no theory of rights to appeal to, no natural law, no charter of a founding. There was only precedent: this is how it has always been. And where precedent was thin, it could be aged artificially, in the writing, by a scribe who knew what an ancient text was supposed to look like.

The "in" and the "out"

Who was inside the protection?

The citizens of Assur and Harran in the Assyrian heartland. The citizens of the Babylonian cult cities. The temple establishments, which held estates and personnel and could write to the king in their own right. The scholars, whose position and its unusual latitude were examined in the previous module. And a group the Zakutu treaty names as a distinct constituency to be bound, alongside the governors and the officers: *the exempted people*.

Who was outside?

Everyone else in the empire. The Assyrian farmer on the Harran plain paid the corn tax and the straw tax and owed the *ilku*. The deportee resettled at Guzana had no charter and no city. The provincial in Samerina had been counted as an Assyrian, which meant, as an earlier module showed, that he had been assessed like one. None of these appear in *Advice to a Prince*, and there is no document anywhere in the Assyrian record that protects them from anything.

But the more revealing question is not who was in — it is *what the protection attached to*.

It did not attach to a person. It did not attach to a status, a birth, an occupation or a class. It attached to a **city**, and a man held it by living inside a particular wall. A citizen of Sippar had the protection of Shamash; the same man, having moved forty miles, did not. The *kidinnu* was a thing set up in the gates — Esarhaddon records having set it up in the gates of Assur, and the phrasing is spatial because the thing was spatial.

Which is exactly what one would expect from a privilege granted in order to buy a constituency. Assyria needed the cities, so it bought the cities, so the liberty is municipal. **A liberty attaches to whatever unit the buyer needed to purchase**, and looking at the unit tells you who was being bought.

Speech, petition, assembly

The module should be thorough about the other freedoms, because the answers are more interesting than a flat negative.

Petition was real and unusually broad. The channel described in the previous module — direct correspondence to the king — was not confined to the great officers. Private persons wrote; priests wrote; scholars wrote; informers wrote. A city could write, and one did, quoting *Advice to a Prince* at the king. Whether any given letter was read is unknowable, but the channel existed, was known to exist, and was used by people well below the top of the hierarchy.

Assembly survived, in a specific and limited form. Assur had possessed a city assembly since the Old Assyrian period, when the polity was run by "the City" as a corporate body; the Babylonian cities had their own assemblies, and Sargon left them in place. But these were municipal bodies handling temple and civic business, and there is no evidence that any of them ever debated an imperial question or was expected to. An assembly that manages a temple's estates and adjudicates local disputes is a real institution; it is not a check on a king four hundred miles away.

Speech produces the most interesting result, and it is a straight contradiction that resolves into a rule.

On one side, Esarhaddon's succession treaty made the *failure* to report seditious talk — from a family member or from anyone at all — a capital matter for the offender and his household, and had that sworn by every servant of the king. That is not merely the absence of free speech; it is a positive duty of denunciation, sworn under divine curse, transmitted to one's children.

On the other side, the correspondence examined in the previous module shows officials writing to the king with remarkable frankness about failures, shortages and each other, and shows scholars telling him things he plainly did not want to hear — including that a man he had just promoted was a drunkard — with no sign that any of them suffered for it.

The two facts are not in tension once the direction is specified. **Speech upward was protected in practice; speech sideways was capital.** The state wanted accurate information and feared coordination, and it drew the line exactly where those two interests separate. A man could tell the king anything. He could not discuss it with his neighbour.

Protection from the apparatus existed and was procedural. There were courts, standard contract forms, witnesses, sealed documents and recorded judgements; a governor's tax demand against an exempt field could be contested by writing to the king. But note where the appeal ran. It ran upward, to the apex. That is a mechanism

for correcting subordinates, and a good one — it is why Assyrian administration worked. It is not a mechanism for constraining the crown, and nothing in the Assyrian system was.

What survived the meadow

Which brings the module back to Babylon, and to the most revealing document in it.

Sennacherib flattened the city in 689 and made the record of it permanent, carved on the rock at Bavian, in the passage quoted above. His son Esarhaddon rebuilt it, restored its temples, returned its people, and had to explain how this was consistent with his father having been right.

The solution his scribes found is a small masterpiece. In Esarhaddon's account, the destruction was not Sennacherib's act at all. The Babylonians had squandered the treasure of Esagila in Elam to buy military aid; Marduk was angered; and it was *Marduk* who brought up the Arahtu canal and poured its waters over his own city and made it like a ruin heap, and Marduk who sent the inhabitants into slavery. The god then wrote seventy years as the measure of the city's desolation. And then:

> *"But the merciful Marduk—his anger lasted but a moment—turned (the Book of Fate) upside down and ordered its (the city's) restoration in the eleventh year."*

The parenthesis is Luckenbill's supplement. And the image has a mechanical basis that modern scholarship has drawn attention to: in cuneiform, the sign for seventy and the sign for eleven are inversions of one another, so that a tablet physically turned upside down converts one number into the other. Whether that is the intended point of the passage is a scholarly reading rather than something the text states, and it should be flagged as such — but the arithmetic works, and it is hard to think of another reason to choose those two numbers.

Read the politics under the theology. Esarhaddon could not say that his father had been wrong, because his own title ran through his father. So he attributed the destruction to the god, the sentence to the god, and the commutation to the god, and rebuilt the city his father had abolished without ever conceding that abolishing it had been a mistake.

Why did he bother? Because the destruction had cost, and the cost was legible to him. His father had been murdered. The Babylonian question had split the Assyrian governing class since Tukulti-Ninurta I was killed by his own nobles for what he did to Babylon five centuries earlier, as the Landscape established. And a king who needed

Babylonia quiet needed the urban constituency, and the price of the urban constituency was the privileges.

So the residue survived the physical destruction of the thing it attached to. The city was mud; the claim was not. It lived in copies of the text kept in libraries, in the memory of a governing class that had been buying that constituency for two centuries, and above all in the arithmetic of the next king who found himself needing the same people.

And it outlived Assyria entirely. The tradition of urban privilege in Babylonia carried through the Neo-Babylonian period, and when Cyrus took Babylon in 539 he presented himself in precisely these terms — as the restorer of the cities, the returner of the gods, the reliever of a burden improperly imposed. The Cyrus Cylinder is a conqueror's own polemic and should not be read as a constitutional document, but the fact that a Persian found this the most useful thing to say to Babylon is evidence about what Babylon had spent three centuries establishing.

Reading liberty against the framework

The framework holds that where protections exist, the peasant did not create them: factions inside the hierarchy obtain them, bargaining from strength, when neither side wants to destroy the arrangement and a concession is therefore cheaper than a fight — and that these factional fights leave a residue which accretes. Assyria confirms all of that and sharpens it in three places.

One: the unit a liberty attaches to names the constituency that was bought. This is the finding most likely to be useful elsewhere. Assyrian and Babylonian liberty attached to cities, not to persons, classes, occupations or estates. It was held by residence inside a wall, it was recorded in a charter granted to a place, and the physical token of it stood *in the gates*. That is not an accident of Mesopotamian custom. It is a direct read-out of the transaction: Assyria needed the urban temple communities as a counterweight to the tribes, so it bought cities, so the protection is municipal. **Where a study finds liberties, it should ask what unit they attach to before it asks what they contain, because the unit is the receipt.** A liberty attaching to a guild was bought from guilds; one attaching to a province was bought from provincial elites; one attaching to persons was bought — much later and much more rarely — from a constituency that had learned to organise as persons.

Two, and this is the central finding: the thing that made these liberties more than rhetoric was not a court but a coup. No institution existed that could compel an Assyrian king; the enforcement clause of *Advice to a Prince* names a god, and gods are slow. What actually enforced the privileges was that a violation constituted a

publicly usable justification for removing the king — which is what Sargon's charter demonstrates, since his court reached for that charge above all the others available.

This produces a category the collection should hold onto, because it is neither a right nor mere rhetoric. **A liberty with no enforcement mechanism may nonetheless be a stored justification, waiting for a faction that needs one.** Such a thing is real: it changes what a king can safely do, because he knows the charge exists and knows who would use it. But it has three properties that distinguish it sharply from a right.

It cannot be invoked by its beneficiary. The citizens of Assur could not summon anybody. They could only wait for a magnate who wanted the king gone to notice that they had been wronged.

It operates only when someone powerful wants it to, and therefore its timing is set entirely by other people's quarrels.

And it is strongest when the arrangement is least stable, which is the reverse of how a right behaves. A settled reign can ignore a stored justification indefinitely. A contested accession — and the previous module showed that Assyria had six of them — makes it suddenly extremely valuable to whoever is willing to pick it up.

That is a genuinely different kind of thing from a protection a person can assert, and the difference is not one of degree. It explains why the Babylonian cities spent three centuries accumulating charters, copies, precedents and archaising texts rather than institutions: institutions were not available to them, and the only asset they could accumulate was a stock of arguments that somebody else might one day need.

Three: residue survives the destruction of what it protected, because what accretes is not the privilege but the precedent that a privilege was owed. Sennacherib erased Babylon so thoroughly that he could describe the site as a meadow, and eleven years later his son restored the city and its status, using a theological device that let him do it without impeaching his father. The claim was more durable than the walls, because it lived in copies and in the calculations of successors. And the measure of how much easier it is to reverse a policy than to admit a king erred is precisely the elaborateness of the device Esarhaddon needed: an angry god, a written sentence, a merciful commutation, and a tablet turned upside down.

One last thing has to be said, and it is the thing this module has been circling. Everything described here — the charters, the exemptions, the *šubarrû*, the stored justification, the accreting residue — was won by people who already had a great deal, and was bought with money and support that the people who had none supplied. The corvée the citizens of Sippar were exempt from was performed by somebody. The tax the citizens of Assur did not pay was levied on the Harran plain. **The liberties of the**

Assyrian empire were real, and they were paid for by the unfree, and there is no reading of the evidence in which those are separable facts. Legibility is not pardon, and it is not celebration either; but it is worth knowing exactly how these things are made, because they are still made this way.

A note on sources. Extended primary quotation is from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Sennacherib on the destruction of Babylon in 689 (vol. II, § 341), and Esarhaddon on Marduk's anger, the seventy years, and the reversal (vol. II, §§ 642–643). **Flag:** the parenthetical *"(the Book of Fate)"* in the Esarhaddon passage is Luckenbill's supplement, not a rendering of a word in the text.

Advice to a Prince is quoted only in paraphrase, apart from the three-word phrase *"at the herald's proclamation."* The standard edition is W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960), with a more recent translation by Benjamin Foster; both are in copyright, and the clauses are therefore summarised here rather than reproduced. The observation that the manuscripts employ archaising sign values, older linguistic forms and unusual logographic density as affectations intended to increase the text's apparent age, and that this frustrates dating, follows the current specialist assessment; the eighth-century date of the Nippur manuscript, the listing of the Nineveh copy in the royal library inventory (K.10182), and the quotation of the text in a letter from Nippur to an Assyrian king follow Lambert and Erica Reiner, "The Babylonian Fürstenspiegel in Practice" (1982), with Miguel Civil's appendix. The Babylonian term *šubarrû* for the protected freedoms follows that literature.

Other modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. Sargon II's grants of privilege, tax and debt remission to the Babylonian cities, the survival of the city assemblies and temple communities under Assyrian rule, the retention of the traditional governor at Nippur, and the reinstatement of rulers displaced by Merodach-baladan follow Karen Radner's account of Assyrian policy in Babylonia for the Assyrian Empire Builders project. Esarhaddon's setting up of the *kidinnu* in the gates of Assur follows Borger's edition as cited in the literature on Assyrian religion and power. The cuneiform inversion of seventy and eleven is a scholarly reading of the Esarhaddon passage, widely repeated but not stated by the text. The Cyrus Cylinder is cited only for the fact of its rhetoric, and the recent literature on its political-religious message is noted rather than relied upon.

Weak links, stated plainly. The date and authorship of *Advice to a Prince* are genuinely unknown, and the archaising language was designed to make them so; the argument here places its *deployment* in the eighth and seventh centuries on the strength of the Nippur manuscript and the letter that quotes it, which is secure, but says

nothing certain about when it was composed. The reconstruction of the Babylonian city privileges as a purchase of urban support against the Chaldean tribes is an interpretation of a well-attested pattern of grants, not something any Assyrian document states as a motive; an alternative reading, that the grants expressed genuine Assyrian reverence for the ancient cult centres, is available and is not exclusive of this one. Whether the Assur Charter's accusation against Shalmaneser V was true is unknowable, and the argument here does not require it to be; but a reader who thinks the charge wholly invented should note that the module's claim then rests on what Sargon's court judged would persuade, which is weaker evidence. The seventy-to-eleven inversion is elegant and may be a modern over-reading. And the general proposition offered here — that the unit a liberty attaches to identifies the constituency that bought it — is a generalisation from one case and is offered for testing against the other studies in this collection.

MODULE 10

A Mound and a Ruin

Module 10 · Change & Collapse — who did not rise, who did, the order in which the four cracks opened, and why an order built so that it could not stop could also not retrench

The formula returns

The Babylonian chronicle that records the fall of Nineveh is terse to the point of curtness — the whole event gets two lines — and the second of them reads:

> *"The spoil of the city, a quantity beyond counting, they plundered, and [turned] the city into a mound and a ru[in]."*

C. J. Gadd, who found the tablet in the British Museum and published it in 1923, noticed at once what the scribe had done, and his observation is worth having in his own words:

> *"With a supreme, if unconscious, irony her own end is described in the very phrase with which her kings had so often vaunted their former conquests."*

He is right, and the phrase is the one that has run through this study from Module 1 onward. *I turned it into a mound and a ruin heap* is the standard Assyrian formula for a city destroyed beyond recovery — Ashurnasirpal used it of the towns of Nirbu, Shalmaneser of Hanigalbat, Sargon of Musasir, Sennacherib of Babylon. A Babylonian scribe, writing up the destruction of Nineveh, passed the sentence on Assyria in Assyria's own words.

Whether the irony was unconscious, as Gadd assumed, is a question this module will leave open. The scribe had access to Assyrian formulae and a good ear.

The arithmetic of the fall

The speed is the first thing that needs establishing, because it constrains every explanation.

At its zenith around 670 BC, Assyria had taken Egypt, broken Elam, and held more territory than any state in the world had ever held. Ashurbanipal died in 631. Nineveh fell in August 612. Nineteen years.

Narrow it further. Nabopolassar is in open war with his Assyrian overlord by 616, campaigning up the Euphrates. Four years later Nineveh is a ruin. The final siege ran from the month of Sivan to the month of Ab — roughly three months.

And the archive stops before any of it. The Assyrian royal inscriptions end abruptly after the destruction of Susa around 639. Business records from the heartland thin out and largely stop after 631. The eponym canon, which has given this study an absolute chronology since 911, breaks down.

The empire stopped writing about itself a generation before it stopped existing. That silence is the first symptom, and by the standards established in Module 7 it is diagnostic: an outward-facing record that cannot report failure simply ceases when there is nothing else to report.

What did not happen

Now the negative finding, and it belongs first because it is the most important thing in the module and possibly in the study.

No deportee rose. Over two and a half centuries, on the standard extrapolation, something in the order of four million people were forcibly moved, and roughly eighty-five per cent of them were resettled in the Assyrian heartland — inside the triangle, within a few days' march of Nineveh, Kalhu and Assur. In the nineteen years of the empire's disintegration, not one of them appears in any source as a rebel. There is no rising of the resettled, no mass defection, no opening of a gate from within by the descendants of people carried off from Samaria or Hamath or Chaldea.

No province rose. Samerina, Guzana, Que, Carchemish, Magiddu, Hamath, Arpad — the annexed territories, the ones whose kingdoms had been abolished and whose people had been counted as Assyrians and taxed as Assyrians and set to carrying baskets, produce no insurrection in the record of the collapse. They simply pass, quietly, from one imperial administration to another.

No slaves, no peasantry, no urban poor. Nothing.

The one region that produces sustained armed resistance is the region that had produced it for three centuries — the Chaldean and Aramean south, with the marshes behind it — which is precisely the population Module 5 identified as the one with a viable exit.

It is worth being explicit that this is not an argument from silence in the weak sense. The principal source for the collapse is a Babylonian chronicler writing up the destruction of his own state's oldest enemy. A general rising of Assyria's subject peoples would have been the most satisfying thing he could possibly have recorded, and he does not record it, because it did not happen.

The largest programme of forced population transfer in the ancient world produced not one documented insurrection, and the empire that ran it was destroyed by two states.

Fracture, at the point the arrangement had left unpriced

The first crack opens exactly where Module 8 said it would.

Ashurbanipal died in 631. Ashur-etel-ilani took the throne with the backing of the chief eunuch Sin-shumu-lishir and his household soldiers, and was dead within four years. Sin-shar-ishkun succeeded in 627. In 626 the chief eunuch — his position threatened by the new king's men — revolted, seized Nippur and Babylon, and claimed the throne of Assyria for himself. He held it three months.

Three months is nothing, and it was decisive. His revolt broke Assyrian authority in northern Babylonia at the precise moment that another man was building a following there, and Sin-shar-ishkun's attempt to retake Babylon in October of that same year was the last Assyrian campaign ever mounted for the city.

Two accessions in five years, a usurpation by the highest officer in the state, and the permanent loss of the empire's oldest and richest dependency — all of it inside the mechanism that Module 8 identified as the one thing the Assyrian arrangement had never managed to price: the transfer of the crown.

Who Nabopolassar was

This matters more than anything else in the module, because the whole framework's claim about where change comes from turns on it.

He was not a peasant leader and he was not, in any useful sense, a tribal insurgent. The chronicle calls him consistently *the king of Akkad*, and Gadd's reading of the title — still the standard one — is that it describes a sphere of authority *assigned to him by his Assyrian overlord*, covering northern Babylonia while the middle and southern regions remained under city-governors reporting directly to Assyria. He revolted from inside that position, somewhere between 620 and 617, and he began by seizing cities near Babylon such as Sippar.

The man who destroyed Assyria held an Assyrian office. He did not break in from outside; he defected at the top of a provincial hierarchy and took its apparatus with him.

That is elite fracture in the framework's exact sense, and it is worth setting beside the qualification the framework insists on. The population Nabopolassar came from and recruited in — the Chaldean and Aramean south — is the one population in the

empire with a three-century record of resistance and a geography the Assyrian army could not enter. That energy is real, it is a genuine cause, and without it he would have had no base. But look at *how* it was converted into structural change. Not by insurgency, not by a rising, not by the marshes swallowing another Assyrian army. He took cities. He claimed a throne. He built a state with a treasury and a standing force. And then he made a treaty with another state.

The population supplied the man and the recruiting ground. It did not supply the mechanism, and the mechanism is what did the work. The weight was on the lever, exactly as the framework says; the lever was worked from a governor's seat.

Exhaustion

The second crack had been opening for two generations, and four things went into it.

The civil war of 652–648. Shamash-shumu-ukin, installed as king of Babylon by the settlement his father had bound the empire to swear, revolted against his brother, and the empire fought four years of war in its own southern heartland. That is the most expensive kind of war available: it destroys the tax base, consumes the army, and produces no booty, because everything captured already belonged to the state doing the capturing.

The loss of Egypt. Psammetichus I threw off Assyrian domination around 655. The richest conquest in the empire's history, taken at enormous cost by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, was gone within a generation and was never recovered.

The end of the plunder curve. Module 6 traced the geography of the great sacks — Musasir 714, Babylon 689, Memphis and Thebes 671 and 667, Susa 647 — each further away, each dearer to reach. Susa is the last, and the royal inscriptions stop shortly after it. An empire that had been meeting recurring commitments out of non-recurring receipts had run out of ancient treasuries to open.

And the rain stopped. This is the newest piece of evidence and it deserves care. In 2019 Ashish Sinha and colleagues published a precisely dated speleothem record from Kuna Ba cave in northern Iraq, three hundred kilometres from Nineveh, giving four thousand years of precipitation history. Their finding is that the Assyrian rise coincided with a two-century interval of anomalously wet climate — the wettest in the whole four-thousand-year record — and that the seventh century brought megadroughts as severe as recent droughts in the region but lasting for decades.

Set that against the Landscape. The Assyrian heartland grows grain on rainfall, in the belt the specialists call the zone of uncertainty, where the year-to-year variability runs forty to sixty per cent. The empire built three capitals and inflated its heartland

population with millions of resettled people on the working assumption that the harvest would come. For two centuries, unusually, it did. Then it stopped.

And here is the detail that makes it structural rather than merely unfortunate. Babylonia is irrigated. The drought that hit the rain-fed north did not hit the canal-fed south the same way. **The megadrought did not simply weaken Assyria; it re-priced Assyria against Babylon**, in exactly the terms the Landscape used to distinguish the two countries on its first page.

The finding should be flagged as recent, and the authors themselves frame it as contributing to the collapse rather than causing it. But the correlation is precise, the mechanism is intelligible, and it explains something the political narrative alone does not: why Nineveh, which had withstood everything for three hundred years, was overrun in three months.

Conquest

The third crack is recorded in a single line, at Assur, in 614:

> *"[The king of Akk]ad and Ky[axar]es at the city met one with the other. Friendship and alliance they established together."*

Neither of them could have done it alone, and the chronicle proves it. In 615 Nabopolassar besieged Assur, failed, was driven off by the relieving army from Nineveh, and fled down the Tigris until he could shelter in the citadel at Takrit, where the Assyrians besieged him for ten days before giving up. That is a Babylonian king being comprehensively beaten by an empire everyone now calls moribund.

A year later the Medes took Assur without him — he arrived, in Gadd's phrase, too late for the assault — and Kyaxares had already failed against Nineveh itself earlier that same season. It took the two of them together, with the Umman-manda contingent, three months in 612 to reduce the city.

And it is worth noticing who the Medes were. In 911 they were not in the Assyrian record at all; they first appear in the ninth century as a scatter of horse-breeding chieftaincies in the Zagros, the kind of people from whom Assyrian kings collected tribute in passing and did not otherwise think about. The Landscape noted that the people who would burn Nineveh were not, at the study's opening, worth an Assyrian scribe's attention.

The last ally

Now the fact that should settle the argument about where change comes from, and it comes from the same chronicle.

When Assyria was dying, who fought for it?

In 616, at Qablinu, the Assyrian army in the field was reinforced by the Mannaeans — a people from south of Lake Urmia who had troubled Assyria for years and had finally been beaten by Ashurbanipal's generals. Gadd remarks on the change with some understatement. They were there fighting alongside the men who had defeated them.

And in the same year, in the month of Tisri:

> *"the army of Egypt and the army of Assyria marched after the king of Akkad as far as the city of Qablinu."*

Egypt had thrown off Assyrian rule around 655, under Psammetichus I. In 616, under the same king, Egyptian troops are in Mesopotamia fighting for Assyria. In 609, after Nineveh had fallen and Harran had fallen, Ashur-uballit II crossed the Euphrates with *"a great army of Egyptians"* to try to take Harran back.

Gadd's conclusion, published in 1923 and public domain, is worth quoting because it has not been improved on:

> *"So far from being merely anxious to secure a due share of the spoils of the fallen Assyrian Empire, it is evident that the aim of Egyptian kings was, on the contrary, to sustain at any cost the power of Assyria, as being the only state which had a common interest with themselves in fending off the Scythian onslaughts."*

And there is a human detail attached to the 609 campaign. Necho II's march to Harran was opposed at Megiddo by Josiah, king of Judah, who was defeated and killed. Josephus understood correctly what the Hebrew historian's phrasing has often obscured: Necho went not against Assyria but against the Medes and the Babylonians. Josiah — the king of the one small state that had held out against Sennacherib a century earlier — died trying to stop an Egyptian army from going to Assyria's rescue.

So the empire's last friends were its former victims: the Mannaeans it had crushed, and the Egypt it had conquered and lost. Nothing about this is sentimental and none of it is gratitude. Egypt's calculation was that a Median-Babylonian condominium with the northern hordes behind it was worse for Egypt than a broken Assyria serving as a buffer.

Elites coordinate with elites. That is the default of Module 8 operating across a frontier instead of inside one, and it is the same arithmetic: each party defending its own position, and by doing so defending an arrangement it did not particularly like.

The end

The siege ran from Sivan to Ab in 612. The chronicle records three battles, a mighty assault, the capture of the city, *"a great [havoc] of the chief [men]"*, the death of Sin-shar-ishkun, and the plunder of a quantity beyond counting. It also records that a contingent of the defenders broke out and escaped.

The leader of that breakout was, on Gadd's conjecture and the standard reading since, Ashur-uballit, who reached Harran and — in the chronicle's words — *"in the city of Harran sat upon the throne as king of Assyria."* Gadd notes that the Akkadian is more precisely *for the sovereignty of Assyria*.

And here the study's oldest thread closes. The Landscape argued that the Assyrian warrant was anchored in a place: a god who was a city, a steward invested in a particular temple, a coronation at Assur at which the priest cried that Ashur was king. Assur had been destroyed in 614. The temple was gone. The last ruler of Assyria could not be crowned, and while the Babylonian chronicler calls him king of Assyria, the reading flagged at the outset of this study — that contemporary Assyrian documents appear to have gone on calling him crown prince — remains the more interesting possibility precisely because it would mean the warrant had been load-bearing to the last hour.

Harran fell in 610. In 609 Ashur-uballit and the Egyptians besieged it for two months and failed. After that he is not heard of again.

The chronicle's last line is not about any of this. It is the scribe's own note, in the margin of the destruction of the greatest empire the world had yet seen:

> *"He that loveth [Nab]û and Marduk, let him preserve this, and not suffer it to leave his hands."*

Reading collapse against the framework

The framework holds that structural change never comes from the rising of the ruled, because the common man commands no organised force and a durable order is an armed settlement alterable only by those who do; that it comes instead when the elite fractures, exhausts itself, is conquered by a rival elite, or overbreeds; and that the pressure from below is a real cause operating as weight on a lever worked from above.

Assyria is the strongest confirmation in this collection, and the confirmation rests on negative evidence of unusual quality. Four million people forcibly moved, eighty-five per cent of them planted within a few days' march of the capitals, three centuries of corvée and deportation and taxation — and in the nineteen years of the empire's destruction, not one recorded rising by any of them. And the silence is not the archive's: the man writing the record was an enemy of Assyria with every incentive to celebrate a general revolt, and he had none to report. If the framework's claim were ever going to fail, this is the case in which it should have failed. It does not.

Three refinements follow.

One: the four cracks are not four alternatives. In this case they were a sequence, and the sequence started where the arrangement had left itself unpriced. Fracture came first, at a succession, because Module 8 established that the succession was the one moment at which everything a magnate held was reopened. That fracture — Sin-shumu-lishir's three months — handed northern Babylonia to Nabopolassar, and no Assyrian army ever came back for it. Exhaustion, already advanced through the 652 civil war, the loss of Egypt, the end of the plunder curve and the drought, meant the empire could not re-price the arrangement to buy anyone off. And only then, with the south gone and the treasury empty and the harvest failing, did conquest by two outside hierarchies become possible — and even then it took both of them, and even then it took three months, and even then a contingent fought its way out and set up a kingdom that survived another three years. **The internal crack opened the door; the external ones came through it.** That is a claim about ordering rather than about cause, and it is testable against the other studies in this collection.

Two: popular energy was real, and it entered the story exactly where the framework says it does. Nabopolassar came from the Chaldean south — the one population in the empire that Module 5 identified as having both a standing grievance and a viable exit. Without that base he would have had nothing. But the conversion of that energy into a fallen empire ran through an office, a treasury, a state and a treaty. **The exit-capable population supplied the man; the hierarchy supplied the mechanism.** And it is worth noting that the population which had endured most — the deportees, who had lost everything and could go nowhere — supplied nothing at all, which is the module's clearest demonstration that grievance without exit and without organisation is not a political force. It is a condition.

Three, and this closes the study's spine. Modules 1, 3, 5 and 6 each found, independently, that a different Assyrian subsystem made expansion compulsory: the floor of reach had to be re-demonstrated annually or it stopped pricing anything; the robe made the campaign a religious obligation nobody could decline; the domestic

settlement was funded from transfers that only arrived while the conquests continued; and the fiscal base consumed stocks while paying for flows. Four load-bearing structures, all built on the assumption that there would be more.

Turn that around and the collapse becomes intelligible in a way no single cause makes it. **Every subsystem that made stopping impossible also made contraction impossible.** When Egypt was lost, when Susa turned out to be the last treasury, when the rain failed in the one country that depended on it and did not fail in the country next door, there was no institution anywhere in Assyria capable of proposing a smaller empire — no assembly, no council with standing, no faction whose interest lay in retrenchment, and no theological vocabulary in which a king could say that the god's land had reached its proper extent. The magnates' income came from campaigns. The king's warrant instructed him to extend the frontiers. The free Assyrian's benefit column was fed by deportees who arrived only if new places were taken. The treasury was met by opening the next hoard.

The Assyrian collapse was not a failure to adapt. It was the absence of any mechanism by which adaptation could have been proposed. An order can survive a shock it did not anticipate. What it cannot survive is having built every one of its load-bearing institutions on a single assumption, so that questioning the assumption would have required questioning all of them at once, and no one inside it had either the standing or the words.

Legibility is not pardon. The men who burned Nineveh were not liberators, and the empire that replaced Assyria deported the Judahites within thirty years using the machinery Assyria had built. But it is worth ending on the sentence the Babylonian scribe reached for, whether or not he knew what he was doing. Assyria had spent three centuries turning other people's cities into mounds and ruins, and had written the phrase down each time, in the confidence that the record would last. It did last. It is how we know the phrase. And in 612 somebody else picked it up and used it, once, correctly.

A note on sources. The Fall of Nineveh Chronicle (British Museum 21,901) is quoted throughout from C. J. Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh: The Newly Discovered Babylonian Chronicle No. 21,901 in the British Museum* (London, 1923), which is out of copyright: the destruction of Nineveh and the turning of the city into a mound and a ruin (rev. 43–45); the Egyptian and Assyrian armies marching together in 616 (obv. 10); the Mannaeans fighting for Assyria (obv. 5); the failed Babylonian siege of Assur and the flight to Takrit (obv. 16–22); the meeting of Nabopolassar and Kyaxares at Assur and their alliance (obv. 29); Ashur-uballit's accession at Harran (rev. 49–50); the Egyptian army of 609 (rev. 66–67); and the scribal note at the end. Gadd's own

commentary is likewise quoted directly and by permission of its age: on the irony of the formula, on Egyptian policy toward Assyria, and on the title "king of Akkad" as a sphere of authority assigned by the Assyrian overlord. **Flag:** Gadd's edition is a century old and the chronicle has been re-edited since, notably by Grayson and Wiseman; his restorations are marked in brackets in the original and are reproduced as such here, and the more damaged passages should be checked against a modern edition before any weight is placed on them.

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The reconstruction of the succession sequence 631–626 and Sin-shumu-lishir's revolt follows the standard account, as in Module 8. The megadrought evidence is Ashish Sinha, Gayatri Kathayat, Harvey Weiss, Hanying Li, Hai Cheng and colleagues, "Role of climate in the rise and fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Science Advances* 5 (2019), including the finding that the empire's rise coincided with the wettest two-century interval in the four-thousand-year record and that the seventh-century megadroughts were as severe as modern ones but lasted decades; Weiss's observation that irrigated Babylonia was not affected in the same way as the rain-fed Assyrian heartland is from the accompanying commentary. The end of the royal inscriptions after Susa and the thinning of business records after 631 follow the standard periodisation. Deportation figures are Oded's and Radner's, as in Module 4.

Weak links, stated plainly. The megadrought argument is six years old at the time of writing, and while the speleothem data are not in dispute, the weight to place on climate relative to the political and fiscal causes certainly is; the authors themselves frame it as contributing rather than determining, and this module follows them. The claim that no deportee or provincial rising occurred is an argument from silence, though a strong one for the reason given in the text; a single securely attested provincial revolt in the years 620–609 would qualify it, and none is presently known to this study. The identification of Nabopolassar as an Assyrian appointee rests on Gadd's reading of the title "king of Akkad" and on the pattern of his early campaigns; his origins are genuinely obscure and other reconstructions place him more firmly inside the Chaldean tribal world, which would soften but not overturn the point, since he would still have won by building a state rather than by insurgency. The leadership of the Nineveh breakout by Ashur-uballit is Gadd's conjecture and remains a conjecture. And the claim that the four cracks opened in a determinate order is this study's own generalisation from one collapse; it is offered as a hypothesis about sequencing, not as a law.

MODULE 11

It Was Once Inhabited by the Medes

Module 11 · The Grim Accounting — what the sword cost, on the killers' own figures; whether the metabolic note was called and how it was paid; and how long it took for the largest empire in the world to be forgotten by a man standing on its wall

Two hundred and eleven years later

In 401 BC, ten thousand Greek mercenaries, stranded in Mesopotamia after the death of the prince who had hired them, marched north up the Tigris looking for a way home. Xenophon of Athens, who had studied under Socrates and who kept excellent notes, recorded what they passed.

> *"Here was a large deserted city; its name was Larisa, and it was inhabited in ancient times by the Medes. Its wall was twenty-five feet in breadth and a hundred in height, and the whole circuit of the wall was two parasangs. It was built of clay bricks, and rested upon a stone foundation twenty feet high."*

One day's march further on:

> *"From this place they marched one stage, six parasangs, to a great stronghold, deserted and lying in ruins. The name of this city was Mespila, and it was once inhabited by the Medes. The foundation of its wall was made of polished stone full of shells, and was fifty feet in breadth and fifty in height."*

Larisa is Kalhu. It is the city Ashurnasirpal II built and inaugurated with a ten-day feast for sixty-nine thousand five hundred and seventy-four guests, whose Banquet Stele stood in an alcove by the throne-room door. Mespila is Nineveh: Sennacherib's capital, the largest city in the world in its day, the place where the flayed skin of Ahiababa had been nailed to the wall, where the letters from the scholars arrived, where the library was.

Xenophon is a good observer. He measures the walls, notes the construction, distinguishes the mudbrick from the stone foundation, records the shells in the limestone. He gets every physical detail right.

And he is told — and writes down without evident doubt — that these were Median cities, and that the Persians took Larisa when a cloud covered the sun and the inhabitants fled. Neither statement is true. The Medes held the site of Nineveh for

perhaps half a century, long after the thing that mattered had happened there; the Persians had nothing to do with it.

Two hundred and eleven years after the fall of Nineveh, a well-educated Greek standing on the walls of the capital of the largest empire the world had yet seen was given a garbled folk-tale about somebody else, and had no means of knowing better.

That is the forgetting, dated and documented. This module exists to count what was forgotten.

The sword: the killers' own figures

Every number that follows was carved by the men who did the killing, at royal expense, for an audience that included the gods, in a genre in which the king never loses. Marco De Odorico's study of quantification in the Assyrian royal inscriptions is the standard treatment and it does not encourage confidence: the figures are shaped by rhetorical convention, by a strong preference for certain round and near-round forms, and by the requirements of the literary shape they sit in. They are claims. The honest position is that the real numbers are unknown and will remain so.

With that stated once, here is what the empire said about itself.

Ashurnasirpal II, in the first two years of his reign, in one region: six hundred warriors put to the sword at Kinabu and three thousand captives burned with fire, with nobody left alive to serve as a hostage; fifty warriors and two hundred captives burned at Mariru; three hundred and thirty-two killed on the plain at Nirbu; three thousand warriors at Tela, with many more burned, and many blinded, and many with their hands, noses and ears cut off; the pillar of the living and the pillar of heads at the gate; the flayed chiefs of Suru; and the men of Nirbu slaughtered in the mountains until, in his own phrase, he had dyed the mountain red like wool.

Shalmaneser III: fourteen thousand of the coalition slain at Qarqar in 853, in an account which claims the plain was too small to let their bodies fall and that he bridged the Orontes with corpses; twenty-five thousand, or in a variant twenty thousand five hundred, in another engagement; thirteen thousand killed and three thousand taken alive at Dur-Papsukkal; forty-four thousand troops "uprooted" on the Nairi campaign of 856; and, in a summary text, eighty-seven thousand five hundred men of Hatti deported and included among the people of his land.

Sargon II at Musasir: six thousand one hundred and ten people carried off, along with the god, the goddess, the king's family and the livestock, itemised beside the silver.

Sennacherib on Judah in 701: two hundred thousand one hundred and fifty people, young and old, male and female, brought out of forty-six fortified cities and the countless villages around them. Specialists have argued about that figure for a century,

on the reasonable ground that the whole kingdom of Judah may not have contained so many people.

Ashurbanipal on the Arabian campaign: famine, and people eating the flesh of their children, presented not as an atrocity but as the operation of the curse-clauses of a broken oath.

And behind all of it, the deportation total: on Oded's much-qualified extrapolation, roughly four million four hundred thousand people, plus or minus nine hundred thousand, over two and a half centuries.

The arithmetic nobody carved

Two observations about that ledger, and both matter more than any of the individual figures.

The first is that the deportation programme, all by itself, generated deaths at a scale nothing in the annals records. Module 4 established that the convoys were provisioned — food, clothes, a waterskin, shoes, oil, donkeys — and that Assyrian art shows deportees walking in family groups rather than in chains, and this study accepted that evidence. But a march of several hundred kilometres, in convoy, with the old and the sick and the very young, repeated hundreds of times across two and a half centuries, kills people. Even a low attrition rate applied to four million produces a figure in the hundreds of thousands, and not one of those deaths appears anywhere. They were not battle casualties. They were administrative losses, and the administration that logged the shoes did not log them.

The second is that **there is no Assyrian side of this ledger at all.** In three centuries of royal inscriptions there is not one honest Assyrian casualty figure — only the liturgical formula examined in Module 3: one charioteer, two cavalrymen, three sappers, delivered before the god by a household official at the end of a campaign that had destroyed four hundred and thirty cities.

So the accounting is one-sided by construction. We have the killers' claims about their victims, probably inflated, and nothing whatever about the killers' own dead. The two errors do not cancel. They compound, and they push in opposite directions, which makes the ratio — the thing anybody would actually want to know — permanently unrecoverable.

The reckoning arrives

And then, in nineteen years, the sword came back.

The Babylonian chronicle on Assur in 614 records that the Medes destroyed the city and — in Gadd's rendering — *"cruel havoc he made of the chief men."* Gadd noted that the description is severe enough to stir even the detached chronicler to disgust.

On Nineveh in 612: three battles, a mighty assault, the capture of the city, *"a great [havoc] of the chief [men]"*, plunder beyond counting, and the city turned into a mound and a ruin.

And from the other side, in the one voice that had waited three hundred years to say it, the Hebrew prophet Nahum:

> *"Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not... The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcases; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses."*
> *"And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee from thee, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her? whence shall I seek comforters for thee?"*

And the last verse of the book, which is the grim accounting compressed into one line and delivered by a victim:

> *"There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?"*

The gravity has to be held in both directions here, and holding it is uncomfortable. Nahum is a poem of rejoicing over the sack of a city, and the people inside Nineveh in August 612 were not the men who had flayed Ahiababa two and a half centuries earlier. They were, in substantial part, the grandchildren of deportees — Chaldeans and Cilicians and Arameans and Israelites whose grandparents had been moved there under guard, who had been married to local women at the crown's expense, and who by then knew no other home. Nothing about the fall of Nineveh distinguished anybody.

The metabolic note

Now the second question, and Assyria answers it more clearly than most cases in this collection.

The claim to be tested is that coordination and intensive agriculture lift a population above the land's natural carrying capacity, so that disruption calls the note

and the debt is paid in famine and depopulation. Three lines of evidence converge, and they were assembled independently by people who were not looking for this.

The climate. The speleothem record from Kuna Ba cave, published in 2019, shows that the Assyrian rise coincided with an interval of anomalously wet conditions lasting roughly two centuries — the wettest in the entire four-thousand-year record. The Landscape established that the heartland grows grain on rainfall in the belt bounded by the two- and three-hundred-millimetre isohyets, where interannual variability runs forty to sixty per cent. For two hundred years, in the one place where that mattered most, the rain came.

The engineering. Between 703 and about 688, Sennacherib built in four stages what the excavators call the Northern Assyrian Irrigation System: a branching canal network running from the head at Khinis, roughly ninety-five kilometres to the Khosr and Nineveh; the aqueduct at Jerwan, constructed of more than two million dressed stones with waterproof cement; four further aqueducts bridging the wadis; and the Faida canal cut eight kilometres into bedrock with offtakes feeding local irrigation. Jason Ur has mapped more than sixty kilometres of canal from declassified satellite imagery; the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project has been tracing the rest on the ground and finding channels nobody had recorded.

And the excavators' own account of what it was *for* states the framework's mechanism more precisely than the framework does. The aim, in Morandi Bonacossi's formulation, was to establish a staple-crop economy in Nineveh's hinterland that could be substantially independent of intra- and inter-annual rainfall variability; and the result was a shift from extensive dry farming to an intensive, predictable, high-yield cultivation system based on irrigation, which transformed the rural landscape of the Assyrian core.

The people. Some eighty-five per cent of everyone Assyria ever deported was resettled in the heartland — millions of people, on the standard extrapolation, planted inside the triangle. Three capitals were built there in a hundred and fifty years. Nineveh became the largest city in the world.

Put the three together and the position of the Assyrian core around 650 BC is this: a population sustained simultaneously by an anomalous climate, by a state-built hydraulic system that required continuous maintenance, and by an imported labour force replenishable only by further conquest.

All three failed within a single generation. The rain went in the early-to-middle seventh century, in megadroughts the Kuna Ba record shows were as severe as the worst modern ones but lasting decades. The conquests stopped after Susa in 647, and with

them the supply of new people. And between 614 and 609 the state that dredged the canals ceased to exist.

The note was called, and it was paid. Archaeological survey across northern Mesopotamia shows a dramatic decrease in both the size and the number of inhabited sites in the Assyrian core through the Neo-Babylonian period. The former capitals — Assur, Kalhu, Nineveh — were nearly completely abandoned. Geoarchaeological work on the canal system records its defunctionalisation: the water stopped, and the intensive landscape reverted.

The country did not merely change rulers. It emptied.

And that emptying is what Xenophon walked through. He describes the country south of the Great Zab as largely uninhabited, with prosperous villages only further north toward the foothills. He is not describing a conquered province under new management. He is describing a landscape that had shed its population and had not got it back in two hundred years.

The shape of the account

Set out what can honestly be said, without a total, because there is no honest total.

Sword deaths, on the killers' own claims: hundreds of thousands at an absolute minimum across three centuries, from figures that were composed rather than counted, in a genre built to exaggerate, by men who never once recorded a loss of their own.

Displacement: millions, on an extrapolation carrying a nine-hundred-thousand margin — every one of them a household removed permanently from the ground its dead were buried under, and, within two generations, a household whose children could not have named the country their grandparents came from.

Administrative deaths: unknown and unrecorded, generated continuously by the transport system itself.

Assyrian deaths: unrecorded by policy for three hundred years, and then, in nineteen, a heartland population that largely disappears from the archaeological record.

The metabolic payment: a core region emptied, three capitals abandoned, a hydraulic system silted, and a landscape that did not recover for centuries.

And then, on top of all of it, the forgetting.

Reading the accounting against the framework

Three findings, and the second is the one the framework specifically asked for.

One: the forgetting is measurable here, and it runs at two different speeds. The collection holds that after enough time people forget that violence made the arrangement. Assyria supplies dated instances in both directions.

Outward, and slowly: two hundred and eleven years after Nineveh fell, an educated foreigner standing on its wall, in a position to ask local people, was told it had been Median.

Inward, and much faster: Module 4 found that a deportee's grandchildren could not have named the kingdom their grandparents came from, because after two generations of mixed households in scattered settlements nobody was transmitting it — and Module 10 found that when the empire collapsed, not one deportee community rose, and none reverted to anything, because there was nothing left to revert to.

So the rough rate, offered strictly as an order of magnitude: **two generations to forget who you were; six or seven to forget who did it to you.** The first is faster because it can be engineered, and Assyria engineered it. The second is slower because it only requires everyone who was there to die.

Two: the metabolic debt applies, and this case adds a term the standard version omits. The usual formulation is that coordination and intensive agriculture lift a population above natural carrying capacity, and that disruption calls the note. Assyria confirms that exactly — Sennacherib's canals are as clean an instance of the coordination half as anything in the corpus, and the post-612 survey data are as clean an instance of the payment.

But there was a third lifting agent, and it is not usually listed: **the population was lifted partly by a climatic anomaly that the state had no way of recognising as an anomaly.** Two centuries of the wettest conditions in four thousand years is longer than any institutional memory and far longer than any living one. Every Assyrian who ever made a decision about how many people the heartland could feed had spent his whole life inside a period that was not normal, and had every reason to treat it as normal, because his father and grandfather had reported the same.

Sennacherib's canals are the tell. They are precisely an attempt to make the food supply independent of rainfall, built by a king who could evidently see that the rain was a risk worth ninety-five kilometres of engineering. And the hedge he built had a defect that no one could have priced: it removed the exposure to weather by substituting an exposure to the state. A dry-farming landscape survives a political collapse; an irrigated one does not, because somebody has to dredge the canal. **Assyria hedged the variable it could see and thereby concentrated its entire food security into the variable it could not — the continued existence of the government.**

The generalisation worth carrying forward is therefore not merely that intensive coordination creates a debt, but a question to put to any such case: **what was the coordination calibrated against, and was that baseline real?** A state that has spent two centuries in unusually favourable conditions will have priced its population, its commitments and its tax rates against a mean that does not exist, and will discover this only when the conditions return to what they always were.

Three, on the shape of the ledger itself. Every figure in this module about Assyria's victims comes from Assyria, and every figure about Assyria's own dead comes from nobody, because the genre forbade it. This is the human counterpart of what Module 6 found in the accounts: there, the books balanced every year while the state was structurally insolvent; here, the record enumerates the enemy's dead with precision while making the empire's own losses invisible.

An order that controls its own record does not only conceal its crimes. It conceals its costs, and the second concealment is the one that damages the order itself, because a state that never writes down what a campaign cost cannot know when campaigning has stopped paying. The Assyrian kings knew to six significant figures how many people they had removed from Judah. They had no document anywhere telling them how many Assyrians had died taking Egypt, or what Egypt had cost to hold, or how many men were left. That is not a moral failing; it is an information failure, and Module 7 showed the state was capable of far better wherever the recipient of the information bore the cost of error. Nobody bore the cost of an inaccurate annal until 612.

Legibility is not pardon, and it is important to be exact about what is being made legible. Everything counted here was done by people who believed they were discharging a duty laid on them by a god who owned the land. The four million were moved by officials who requisitioned shoes and oil and worried about the availability of donkeys. The pillar of the living at the gate of Tela was built to make the next town pay without a siege, and it worked, and the next town paid. None of that is exculpatory and none of it should be softened. But it is the reason the accounting matters, because an empire of monsters would teach nothing. This one was administered by competent men following procedures, and it produced, by the end, a country with nobody in it and a name that a passing Greek could not be told correctly.

Xenophon marched past for one afternoon, wrote down the dimensions of the wall, and moved on. He was, so far as anyone knows, the last person for two and a half thousand years to stand there and try to find out what had happened.

A note on sources. Xenophon is quoted from the Loeb translation of the *Anabasis* by C. L. Brownson (1922), which is out of copyright; the Dakyns translation is likewise

public domain and gives the same sense. The passages are *Anabasis* III.4.7 (Larisa) and III.4.10 (Mespila), with the description of the sparsely inhabited country south of the Great Zab from the surrounding chapters. Scriptural quotation is from the Authorised Version: Nahum 3:1, 3:3, 3:7 and 3:19. The Babylonian chronicle is quoted from C. J. Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh* (London, 1923), out of copyright, as in the previous module, including his note on the chronicler's evident disgust at the sack of Assur. Assyrian figures are from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright: Ashurnasirpal II (vol. I, §§ 443–446), Shalmaneser III (§§ 610, 658 and the summary inscriptions), Sargon II on Musasir (vol. II, § 176), Sennacherib on Judah (§ 240), Ashurbanipal on Arabia (§ 828).

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited. The treatment of Assyrian numbers as rhetorically shaped rather than counted follows Marco De Odorico, *The Use of Numbers and Quantifications in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (SAAS 3, Helsinki, 1995). The deportation totals are Bustenay Oded's, with the heartland proportion from Karen Radner, as in Module 4. The climate record is Sinha, Kathayat, Weiss and colleagues, *Science Advances* (2019), as in Module 10. The Northern Assyrian Irrigation System — its four stages between 703 and c. 688, the Khinis-to-Nineveh canal, the Jerwan aqueduct and its stone count, the four further aqueducts, the Faida canal and its offtakes, and the characterisation of the system's purpose as making the staple-crop economy independent of rainfall variability — follows Daniele Morandi Bonacossi and the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project, with Jason Ur's satellite mapping of the canal network and the older excavation of Jerwan by Jacobsen and Lloyd for the Oriental Institute (1935). The post-imperial settlement collapse follows the survey literature for northern Mesopotamia synthesised in recent work on post-imperial Assyria, and the canal system's defunctionalisation follows the geoarchaeological studies associated with LoNAP.

Weak links, stated plainly. Every Assyrian casualty and deportation figure in this module is a claim by the perpetrator and is treated as such; readers should assume the real numbers are unknown, and the argument here requires only that the scale was large and the practice continuous. Sennacherib's 200,150 from Judah in particular is regarded by many specialists as impossible on demographic grounds. The estimate of deaths generated by the transport system itself is an inference from the nature of pre-modern convoy travel and is supported by no direct evidence whatever; it is offered as a category the ledger must contain, not as a quantity. The megadrought evidence is recent and its weight relative to the political causes is contested, as noted in the previous module. The post-612 settlement collapse is well attested by survey but the surveys are uneven in coverage and a portion of the apparent decline may reflect changes in

ceramic visibility rather than in population. And the "rate of forgetting" offered here is built from two data points in one civilisation and should be read as an illustration rather than a measurement.

MODULE 12

Howbeit He Meaneth Not So

Module 12 · Convergence & Divergence — the controlled comparison run at full evidence, the fifth option named and its failure mode identified, what the case adds to the anchor, and the strongest case for Assyria stated at full strength and answered

The line that names the finding

The bitterest witness against Assyria in the ancient world is the Hebrew prophetic tradition, and its sharpest observation about the empire is not an accusation. It is a structural remark.

> *"O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation... Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few."*

Strip the theology and what remains is a claim about instruments: that Assyria was doing something other than what it intended, that its own account of its purposes did not match what its actions were producing, and that the gap between the two was the point.

The prophet meant that God was using Assyria for ends Assyria did not know. This study has arrived, from twelve different directions and without any theology at all, at a version of the same observation. **Assyria built an apparatus that worked, and it produced results the apparatus had not specified.** That is the study's central finding and this module is where it is stated and defended.

The controlled comparison, at full evidence

The study was built around a comparison the record offers and rarely offers: one people, one region, three conquering hierarchies inside a hundred and fifty years, three different answers to an identical problem, three outcomes.

Assyria, 720s. Deport the population of the northern kingdom; split it across at least three widely separated regions — Halah, the Khabur at Guzana, and the cities of the Medes, which the empire had not yet conquered when the deportation was planned; import six unrelated populations into the vacated province; mix them; put a

governor over them; tax them as Assyrians; and, where the letters show the mechanism most clearly, arrange and pay for marriages between deportees and local women.

Outcome: Ran Zadok's survey of the entire Neo-Assyrian documentary record between 732 and 602 identifies seventy-two individuals recognisable as of Israelite or Judaean origin, in the main because they still bore names containing the element *Yahu*. Seventy-two, across seventy years of archives, out of tens of thousands deported. There is no Assyrian campaign against the god of Israel, no martyrdom, no edict. The identity simply stops being transmitted.

Babylon, 597 and 586. Deport the elite — and settle them together. The Al-Yahudu archive shows a place called *āl Yahūdu*, the town of Judah, forming an administrative unit of Judaean state dependants used for taxing and conscription, with related settlements nearby. The people in it hold land, pay taxes, lease property, witness contracts, and keep Yahwistic names across the generations documented.

Outcome: the identity survives, intensifies, and produces a literature and a people still here.

Persia, 539. Return them, pay for the temple, and rule through the restored formation.

Outcome: a province that gave Persia very little trouble, and a formation that outlived all three empires.

The confounds have to stay on the page, because they are serious. The Babylonian deportation is later, better documented, and deliberately concentrated on a scribal and priestly class whose whole business was transmission. Survey archaeology suggests substantial continuity of settlement in the province of Samerina, which would mean the northern dissolution owed as much to the incomers and the mixing as to the removals. And the Judahite case is over-documented relative to everything else precisely because it survived, which is the selection effect this entire subject runs on. The comparison is suggestive. It is not an experiment, and this study will not pretend otherwise.

But it is suggestive in a very specific direction, and the direction is confirmed by a control *inside* the Assyrian operation itself, which is the piece of evidence the study leans on hardest. In 722 Sargon did two different things to the same people in the same year. The population was parcelled and mixed. Fifty chariots' worth of crews were taken into the royal corps as a unit. Twelve years later, in the muster records of 709, that unit is still on the books under its own name, the *Sāmerināia*, with over eighty per cent of its named officers still bearing West Semitic names.

Same conqueror. Same year. Same people. One group broken into fragments, one kept together. After twelve years the first is not identifiable in the record at all and the second is still called the Samarians.

The fifth option

The proposition this study was built to test was that a conqueror meeting an intact rival formation has four options and only four: destroy both the formation and the institution that carries it; replace both; leave both; or remove the institution and leave the formation.

The proposition is confirmed as far as it goes and is incomplete, and Assyria found the missing option.

The four are incomplete because all four assume that formation is something a conqueror does *to a person* — kill him, re-teach him, tolerate him, or disarm him. Assyria worked one level below that, and the mechanism, stated as the study found it:

Formation is not transmitted by teaching. It is transmitted by a community that shares it — and a conqueror who removes the community does not need to touch the formation at all.

A child acquires his framework by growing up among people who agree, without ever having to discuss it, on what the year is called and who the ancestors were and which authority is real and what is beyond argument. That agreement is the mechanism. Break the agreement — take the population off the ground its framework was attached to, split it into parcels too small to sustain a shared world, drop strangers into the gaps, and pay the bride price so that the households themselves are mixed — and transmission stops. Nobody is re-educated. No institution is replaced. The next generation is formed exactly as thoroughly as it would have been, because there is no unformed person; it is simply formed by the surroundings the state has arranged rather than by the inheritance the state has dispersed.

This is a genuine fifth option and not a variant, and it is worth being precise about why it was attractive. It is cheaper than replacement, because transport and rations cost less than a school system or a priesthood. It is far cheaper than a permanent garrison. It does not oblige the conqueror to admit anybody to anything — the conquered receive a tax liability, which is what being *counted as Assyrians* meant. And it leaves no residue of the fourth option's kind, because there is no disarmed rival with an intact shared framework waiting to be re-organised. The framework is gone, not merely deprived of its institution.

The evidence that it worked is the strongest negative evidence in this collection. In the nineteen years of the empire's disintegration, with the state visibly failing, its

capitals besieged and its army destroyed, **not one deportee community rose, and not one reverted to anything.** They had nothing to revert to and nothing to coordinate on. A hostile Babylonian chronicler recording his own state's triumph over its oldest enemy would have relished a general rising of Assyria's subject peoples, and he reports none.

The failure mode

But the fifth option is not a better version of the other four. It has a different failure mode, and identifying it is this study's principal contribution.

The other four fail by producing a rival — a live one, a resentful one, or an inextinguishable one. **The fifth fails by producing something the conqueror did not specify.**

Dissolution is a subtractive operation and it works. What fills the space afterwards is decided by whatever a mixed population finds easiest to converge on, and that is not in the state's gift.

Assyria dissolved Israelites, Hamathites, Chaldeans, Elamites, Anatolians and a dozen others with real success. What it got back was not a nation of Assyrians speaking Akkadian and worshipping Ashur. It was an Aramaic-speaking imperial population — because Aramaic was the speech of the largest displaced bloc and was written in an alphabet a man could learn in a season rather than a syllabary requiring years in a scribal household. By the eighth century Aramaic was the language of diplomacy; by the seventh the palace employed alphabetic scribes alongside cuneiform ones, shown side by side in the wall painting at Til Barsip; and Akkadian ceased to be spoken within the following century and a half.

The empire's own deportation programme killed the empire's own language. That is the failure mode in one sentence, and it generalises: **a state that can dissolve identities cannot thereby choose what replaces them, and the replacement will be whatever is cheapest for the survivors to coordinate on, which is rarely what the palace uses.**

Which yields the sharpened version of the framework's claim about belief. The collection has held that the floor does not require the conquered to believe anything. Assyria refines that:

The state's interest was never in the content of what the conquered believed, but in whether enough of them believed the same thing. A shared framework is the substrate on which coordinated resistance runs — not because it supplies grievance, which is always available, but because it supplies the mutual expectation without which nothing can be organised. Assyria attacked the substrate and left the content alone. It is

the most efficient thing anybody in this collection has been found doing to a conquered people, and, measured over three centuries, among the most destructive; and the two are the same fact.

The anchor

The second proposition put to this study was that a durable warrant must not be issuable by the wearer at will — that no lasting order founds its claim on *I am strongest, therefore I rule*, and that the warrant is always anchored in something the holder appears subject to rather than to control.

Confirmed, in the strongest form the collection has yet met, and with an addition.

Assyria's anchor was maximally external. Not a bloodline, which is a fact about ancestors that a man satisfies by existing. Not a mandate, which is external but has no address. A *place*: the god Ashur, who was the deified city on the limestone spur above the Tigris, whose vice-regent the king was, in a title used continuously for a thousand years; and an investiture in that city's temple at which the priest went before the king and cried out that Ashur was king — an accession that opens by denying that the man acceding is king. The formula was still ringing in Ashurbanipal's coronation hymn six centuries later.

The corpus has established that an anchor must sit outside the apex and must not be manufacturable by the strongest party, and that this creates a standing dilemma: whoever holds the anchor can at any moment declare the strongman the violator, and the coordination machinery he has spent his reign building will then operate against him at full strength.

Assyria supplies the textbook instance of the dilemma discharging. In 722 a usurper took the throne and justified it by charging his predecessor with imposing corvée and labour service on the citizens of Assur in violation of their ancient status, and presenting his fall as the god's judgement. Whether Shalmaneser V ever did it cannot be known. What the Assur Charter proves is that Sargon's court, choosing the charge most likely to make a usurpation acceptable to the men who would have to accept it, chose *he violated the god's city*. The anchor's holders declared the king the violator, and it worked.

And it had a standing price. The exemptions of Assur and Harran from tax, corvée and levy were the annual invoice for the anchor, and the module that examined them found the general form: **the same externality that makes a warrant durable is what makes it expensive.** A warrant a man can issue himself costs nothing and secures nothing, because a say-so cannot underwrite itself. A warrant anchored in something

he appears subject to is credible precisely because the subjection is visible — and visible subjection means an enforceable claim.

The addition Assyria makes is about the founder's dilemma and its solutions. The corpus records two: kill the man and keep the institution, as Chinggis did with his shaman; or capture the institution and staff it, as Constantine did with the church and the Ottomans with the *ulema*. Assyria had a third, and it is the one nobody else in the collection has tried at scale.

Make the anchor a place rather than a person.

A place has no spokesman who can be bribed, killed, promoted or captured. Assur was not a priest with ambitions; it was a hill with a temple on it, and its claim was not a man's opinion but a fact about geography, which is exactly why it worked so well for so long. The king could move his residence to Kalhu, to a city built from nothing at Dur-Sharrukin, to Nineveh — and he was still buried at Assur, and still crowned there, and still styled the god's vice-regent, because he could not move the god.

And the cost of that solution is the last thing this study found. **The most external anchor available is also the most destructible one.** A doctrine survives the burning of its books; a bloodline survives the death of a claimant; an institution survives the killing of its spokesman. A place does not survive being taken apart.

In 614 the Medes destroyed Assur. In 612 Nineveh fell, and a contingent broke out and installed Ashur-uballit at Harran, where — in the Babylonian chronicle's words — he *"sat upon the throne as king of Assyria."* But the coronation happened in the Ashur temple at Assur, and the Ashur temple no longer existed. The reading flagged at the beginning of this study and never abandoned is that Babylonian sources call him king while contemporary Assyrian documents appear to go on calling him crown prince. It rests on a small archival dossier and one scholar's reconstruction, and it may not hold. But if it does, the anchor was load-bearing to the final hour, and Assyria ends as the collection's proof that a warrant genuinely external is a warrant that can be physically taken away.

Convergence

Set Assyria beside the other cases and four things line up.

The default and its shadow. The collection has found that durable hierarchies are arranged so that each man, defending his own position, defends the whole. Assyria did this exceptionally well, by denominating every elite position in a currency only the arrangement issued — appointive office, revocable grant, sealed exemption, a place in a year-list, a share of booty — none of it portable and all of it forfeit on defection. And the shadow the study found is new: **the tighter the default binds between**

successions, the more violent the succession must be, because non-convertible capital makes a change at the top a total revaluation of everything a man owns. Six internal crises in three centuries, all six at a transfer of the crown, and none at a tax revolt, a defeat or a famine.

Liberty, bought by the strong. The framework predicts that protections come from factional bargaining inside the hierarchy, not from below, and leave a residue that accretes. Assyria confirms it exactly: the privileges of the Babylonian cult cities were the price Assyria paid for urban support against the Chaldean tribes, and *Advice to a Prince* — a text the Assyrian king kept catalogued in his own library, and which a city quoted at him in a letter — is the residue in written form, deliberately aged with archaising signs to look immemorial. The study's own addition is diagnostic: **the unit a liberty attaches to names the constituency that bought it.** Assyrian liberty attached to cities because Assyria was buying cities.

Change from the hierarchy. The clearest confirmation in the collection, on negative evidence of unusual quality. Four million people moved, eighty-five per cent of them planted within days of the capitals, and not one recorded rising in nineteen years of visible state failure. The man who destroyed the empire held an Assyrian office and defected at the top of a provincial hierarchy. The population that supplied him — the marsh Chaldeans, the one group with a viable exit — supplied the man and the recruiting ground; it did not supply the mechanism, and the mechanism was a state, a treasury and a treaty with the Medes.

The recursion under the conqueror. The Landscape's contribution: a conqueror never meets an aboriginal baseline in the conquered, and Assyria adds that he does not stand on one either. What Adad-nirari II found in 911 was a completed Middle Assyrian build — the god, the vice-regency, the provincial governorate, the annals as a form, deportation at five-figure scale under Tukulti-Ninurta I — absorbed in childhood as the shape of the world. The empire opens as an irredentist claim, working through a map of losses, in a language of restoration rather than conquest.

Divergence

And four things where Assyria stands alone or nearly so.

The floor was a floor of reach. Not a monopoly on a weapon — everyone had iron by the ninth century — but a monopoly on arrival: moving a large force with its food and engineers six hundred kilometres, cutting road where none existed, crossing unbridged rivers in flood, building fifteen thousand tonnes of assault ramp under archery, and knowing where to go four days after the event. The prediction that follows is precise and the record confirms it: such a floor fails exactly where the delivery

mechanism cannot operate, and Assyria failed at Tushpa on its crag and at Tyre on its island and essentially nowhere else.

Formation delivered rather than withheld. This is where Assyria diverges most sharply from the colonial cases in this collection. The British in Kenya capped education deliberately below belief, because to form the Kikuyu as Englishmen would have meant admitting them, and the corpus's finding there was that a withheld formation is not an absent one but an outsourced one — the field vacated does not stay empty. Assyria did not withhold. It engaged directly, at the level of household composition, and it worked. The comparison sets the two poles of the same variable: an empire that could not afford to form the conquered and lost the field to a rival formation, and an empire that formed them by demography and lost control of the content.

The seam crowded from the top. The Sargonid kings maintained scholars reporting independently on the same celestial events from Nineveh and the Assyrian cities and from Babylon, Borsippa, Cutha, Dilbat, Ur and Uruk — separate men, hundreds of kilometres apart, professionally competitive, unable to collude. That is the framework's own reformist prescription, built deliberately, inside an autocracy. And it was available to one man, which yields the refinement: **plurality of interpreters is an instrument before it is a liberty**, and the difference is not the architecture of the seam but who is permitted to stand where the contradictions become visible.

Four independent reasons it could not stop. The military (a floor of reach must be re-demonstrated or it stops pricing), the theological (the mandate is to extend *his* land, so a king who does not campaign is derelict), the social (the free Assyrian's benefit column was fed by transfers that arrived only while conquest continued), and the fiscal (recurring commitments met from non-recurring receipts, so stopping meant insolvency). Four load-bearing structures, all built on the same assumption, and no institution anywhere with the standing or the vocabulary to question it. Which is why the collapse is best described not as a failure to adapt but as **the absence of any mechanism by which adaptation could have been proposed.**

The strongest case for Assyria

Now the counter-position, stated at full strength, because a study that cannot state the case against itself is worth nothing.

It runs like this.

Everything the modern world believes about Assyrian cruelty comes from two sources, and both are compromised in the same direction. The first is Assyria's own royal inscriptions, which are boasts — composed at royal expense, in a genre where the

king never loses, addressed to gods and to posterity, and designed to terrify. Marco De Odorico has shown that their numbers are rhetorically shaped rather than counted. The flayings and the pillars of heads appear in exactly the documents where a state has every incentive to exaggerate its own ferocity, and almost nowhere else. The second source is the Hebrew prophetic tradition — Nahum's poem of exultation over a burning city, Isaiah's rod of anger — written by people Assyria conquered, preserved because their religion survived, and over-represented in the modern imagination by a factor of perhaps a hundred because their book became scripture in Europe.

So the two hostile sources are the perpetrator's advertising and the victim's polemic, and for once they point the same way. Set them aside and look at what the administrative record actually shows.

It shows a state that provisioned its deportees with food, clothing, a waterskin, shoes and oil, and delayed a convoy because the donkeys had not arrived. It shows a king personally instructing that a group of resettled Aramaeans should be married, and an official asking the crown to pay the bride price. It shows courts, contracts, witnesses, recorded judgements, and a deputy governor writing to the king about whether a particular field was exempt. It shows a postal system that could carry a despatch seven hundred kilometres in under five days, and a scholarly network deliberately structured so that the king would receive contradictory reports and be able to compare them. It shows officials writing frankly about their own failures without apparent fear. It shows land grants to soldiers, irrigation water distributed to the citizens of Nineveh, and cities granted written charters exempting them from tax and corvée — charters so real that violating one could cost a king his throne.

And the outcome measures support the same reading. Deportees were not slaves; they were settled on land with tools and a household, in districts generally better watered than the ones they left, and their descendants appear in the archives holding fields and witnessing contracts. The empire produced three centuries in which no foreign army entered the Assyrian heartland — the longest peace that country has ever had. It produced a road network, a communications system and an administrative technology that the Persians inherited and that shaped every subsequent empire in the region. It produced a library. And when the Assyrian envoy stood under the wall of Jerusalem, the terms he offered were a vine, a fig tree, a cistern, and resettlement in a land of grain and wine, that they might live and not die — which suggests that Assyrian resettlement was something a besieged population could plausibly be *tempted* by.

On this reading, Assyria was not a machine of terror. It was the first genuinely competent multi-ethnic administration in world history, which moved populations carefully because it valued them, integrated them successfully because it needed them,

and has been libelled for two and a half thousand years by the coincidence of its own propaganda and its victims' scripture working, for once, in the same direction.

That case is strong. Every fact in it is in this study, most of it in the modules that were friendliest to Assyria, and none of it is exaggerated.

The answer

It is answered on three points, and the answer credits the achievement without swallowing the self-justification.

First, on the atrocity. The argument that the annals exaggerate is correct and it does not get Assyria where it needs to go. Grant that the numbers are inflated — De Odorico's work makes that near-certain — and the practices remain. Ashurnasirpal did not merely claim to have burned three thousand captives at Kinabu; he claimed it in a text carved on the walls of a state apartment where foreign envoys waited, and he described building a pillar of living men at a city gate, and he recorded that the flayed skin of a rebel was spread on the wall of Nineveh, and Module 1 showed *what it was for* — the tribute of Laqe arrives two clauses later, which is the whole point of the passage. A state does not advertise a practice it is not performing, because the advertisement only prices the next city if the next city believes it, and belief requires instances. The correct conclusion from the inflated numbers is not that the terror was invented but that **it was a deliberate policy instrument whose effectiveness depended on being publicised, which is precisely why the record of it is unreliable and precisely why it is real.**

Second, on the humane administration. All of it is true and none of it is a defence, because the two things were not in tension for the Assyrians and should not be treated as being in tension now. The same state that issued shoes and oil to a convoy was issuing them to people it had taken at spearpoint from towns it had burned, and the care was instrumental: Radner's own reading is that the deportees were meant to arrive in good physical shape *because their labour and abilities were extremely valuable*. The bride price paid by the crown was not kindness; Module 4 established what it was for. The competence is not a mitigating circumstance. It is what made the whole thing possible at four million people, and a cruelty administered by competent men following procedures is not a lesser thing than one administered by monsters. It is a larger one, because it scales.

Third, and this is the point on which the strong case actually fails. Its central claim is that the empire *integrated populations successfully*. It did not integrate them. It dissolved them, and the difference is the whole of this study.

Integration is a two-way transaction in which the incorporated acquire standing and the incorporating order changes to accommodate them. What Assyria offered was a tax status. *As Assyrians I counted them* meant, in the state's own words in the same titulary, *tribute and taxes I imposed upon them like those imposed upon the Assyrians* — and that was the whole content of the offer. The conquered were never told a story about why Assyrian rule was just, because nobody ever tried to tell them one; the robe was cut for the god, the court, the army and posterity, and was buried in foundations or carved in a script the viewers could not read. The one recorded instance of an Assyrian addressing a subject population in its own language is a siege negotiation aimed at getting a gate opened that week, in which the officer argues from the *besieged city's own god* because he has nothing else to offer them.

And the measure of the difference is Zadok's seventy-two. A successfully integrated population is visible in the record as itself — as the *Sāmerināia* were, for as long as they were kept together. A dissolved one is not visible at all. Seventy-two identifiable individuals across seventy years of archives is not the signature of integration. It is the signature of a method that worked.

So the honest verdict is not that Assyria was better than its reputation or worse. It is that its reputation is aimed at the wrong thing. The flaying and the impalement are real, and they were a pricing instrument, and they are not the most consequential thing the empire did. **The most consequential thing Assyria did was to discover that you can end a people without killing them, by removing them from each other and paying for the weddings, and that this is cheaper than a garrison and leaves no organised enemy behind.** No source calls that an atrocity. There is no word for it in the annals, and no accusation about it in Nahum, and no modern reputation attached to it at all. It was administered by officials worrying about donkeys.

And it did not do what the palace intended, which is where this module began. The empire that dissolved a dozen peoples got back a population speaking a language its own scribes had to hire specialists to write, with no ancestral loyalties to revert to and no particular loyalty to Assyria either — which is why, when the end came, nothing rose in the provinces to defend it and nothing rose from the graves of the old kingdoms to celebrate. There was nobody left in either condition.

Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so. The prophet meant that a great power was an instrument in a hand it could not see. What this study found is nearer and colder: that a state can build an apparatus of genuine sophistication, run it competently for three centuries, achieve exactly the effect it designed the apparatus to achieve, and be destroyed in nineteen years partly by the consequences of its own success — its language displaced by the tongue of the people it had moved, its heartland

populated by millions who could not feed themselves once the rain failed, and its every load-bearing institution built on the assumption of a conquest that had to continue and could not.

The machinery outlived the machine. Babylon deported Judah within thirty years using it. Persia inherited the roads, the provinces and the relay, and improved them. And two hundred and eleven years after Nineveh fell, a Greek soldier walked past the wall, measured it accurately, and was told it had belonged to somebody else.

A note on sources. Scriptural quotation is from the Authorised Version, public domain: Isaiah 10:5–7. The Babylonian chronicle is quoted from C. J. Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh* (London, 1923), out of copyright. Assyrian primary quotation in this module recapitulates passages established in earlier modules, all from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago, 1926–27), out of copyright; the phrases *"As Assyrians I counted them"* and *"tribute and taxes I imposed upon them like (those imposed) upon the Assyrians"* are from Sargon II (vol. II, §§ 30, 84).

Modern copyrighted scholarship is paraphrased and credited, and this module rests on the sources credited in the modules it summarises: Oded and Radner on deportation and resettlement; Pearce and Wunsch on the Al-Yahudu archive; Zadok's count of identifiable Israelites and Judaeans in the Neo-Assyrian record; Dezső and Dalley on the *Sāmerināia* unit; De Odorico on quantification in the royal inscriptions; Parpola, Hunger and Watanabe on the scholars, the astrological reports and the treaties; Mattila on the magnates; Postgate on taxation and provincial administration; Lambert and Reiner on *Advice to a Prince*; Saggs on the Assur Charter; Morandi Bonacossi and Ur on the irrigation system; Sinha and colleagues on the climate record; and Dubovský on the intelligence services. The framework findings on the anchor — the four properties, the disqualification of "I am strongest," and the founder's dilemma with its two historical solutions — are from the collection's own comparative study of that subject, to which this case adds the third solution and its cost. The reading of the withheld colonial formation as an outsourced one is the collection's finding from British Kenya, used here as the contrast pole.

Weak links, stated plainly. The three-empire comparison is confounded in the four ways set out above — date, documentary density, selection of deportees, and survivorship bias — and the study's confidence in it rests less on the comparison itself than on the internal control provided by the *Sāmerināia*, which is a single case. Zadok's seventy-two depends on identifying people by theophoric names, a method whose limits Oded set out at length: deportees commonly adopted local naming patterns, so name-loss and identity-loss are not the same measurement, and the figure should be read as an upper bound on visibility rather than a count of survivors. The

claim that no deportee community rose during the collapse is an argument from silence, strong for the reasons given but not proof. The reading of Ashur-uballit II as an uncrowned crown prince rests on a small archival dossier and one scholar's reconstruction. And the central proposition offered here — that dissolving a formation cannot determine what replaces it — is a generalisation from one case, and is offered to the collection for testing rather than as an established result.

On the case as a whole. Two of the twelve modules rest more heavily on inference than the rest and should be treated with corresponding caution: Module 4, whose reading of the marriage letters as an instrument of formation rather than of demographic management is this study's own, and Module 5, whose central claim that revolt tracked exit rather than grievance cannot be separated from the alternative that tribal social organisation, rather than terrain, made those populations capable of coordinated resistance. Both are defensible; neither is proved. And throughout, the deepest limitation has been the one named at the outset: for most of three centuries the only voice available is the conqueror's own, carved in stone, at royal expense, for an audience that included the gods, in a genre in which the king never loses. Where a second voice exists this study has spent heavily. Where it does not, it has said so.